

A BACHELOR MAID AND HER BROTHER



By L. T. THURSTON

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"I'm so sorry for her," said Helen.
Frontispiece *A Bachelor Maid and Her Brother*

A BACHELOR MAID AND HER BROTHER

BY

I. T. THURSTON

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Ventures" Etc., Etc.*

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A BACHELOR MAID AND HER BROTHER.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

JOHN RAMSAY sat reading his weekly newspaper by the light of the kerosene lamp. His steel-bowed glasses did not fit his eyes well, and he fidgeted restlessly trying to get a good light on his paper. It fretted him that he could not see better, and he muttered some impatient words under his breath.

His wife was washing the supper dishes. She was a slender little woman, with a timid, deprecating manner. She was always more inclined to listen to others than to talk herself, and in her faded blue eyes, there was a gentle appealing look, singularly timid and childlike.

As she moved from table to closet she cast frequent glances at the tall, old-fashioned clock that stood in the corner of the kitchen. When her

work was done she took off her checked gingham apron, revealing a white one beneath it, rolled down her sleeves, and brought her work-basket to the table where her husband sat reading.

For ten minutes there was no sound in the kitchen except the rustling of the farmer's paper as he turned it. Again and again his wife's eyes wandered towards the clock. If he noticed this, he made no sign.

When the clock struck seven, she looked up at him timidly.

"John, I'm afraid you'll be late. The train gets in at ten minutes of eight, you know," she suggested.

"Humph!" grunted the farmer, and turning another page, read on in silence.

The wife sighed—a very faint, low sigh it was, but her husband's ears were sharp. Perhaps too, he had been waiting for some excuse to say what he had to say. He laid aside his paper and faced her suddenly.

"Now look here, Mary," he began, "it's full time we had an understanding once for all about this matter. I've agreed to let them two children of your sister's come here, an' to do for 'em just as we'd do for our own if we had any."

He paused and looked at her impressively.

"Yes, John," she assented meekly, "an' I think 'twas real good of you to do it when they're no kin of yours an' their mother only my half sister,

too—but truly, I don't believe you'll ever be a cent the poorer for it, John; and think how pleasant 'twill be for us to have two young things to brighten up the house, 'specially in the long winter evenings when your eyes won't let you read till bedtime."

"Don't you trouble yourself 'bout my eyes," he responded testily, "I reckon they'll last my time; an' as to whether I'll be the poorer for takin' this boy an' girl—that remains to be seen. Anyhow I ain't grudgin' 'em a livin', but the point's this. I've made no secret of my ideas 'bout bringin' up children. To my mind, the boys an' girls are mostly spoiled by their up-bringin' now-days. Look at my sister! See how she an' her husband slaved for those children of theirs, an' did without things they reely needed so's to get everything under the sun that them children hankered after—an' what did it all amount to? You know how 'twas—how the girl she went an' married that shif'less Bowen feller, an' the boy cleared out an' went West somewheres an' hain't been home to see his father 'n' mother for five years."

"But he's done a good deal for 'em. He's paid off the money his father had borrowed," interposed the low voice of the wife.

"What if he has? It was borrowed to pay his schoolin' I'll warrant. Well now, ye understand, I don't propose to have any such doin's in my family. I'll let this nephew an' niece of yours

come here, an' I'll feed an' clothe 'em as well's we're fed an' clothed ourselves; but I expect 'em to take hold an' work same's you an' me do, an' I won't have 'em spoiled with pettin' an' molly-coddlin'. You understand me, Mary?"

He paused for a reply. Her eyes cast another swift furtive glance at the tall clock, as she answered hesitatingly,—

"I understand, but—" Suddenly her timid submissive air seemed to fall away from her and into her thin, worn face there came a look—a look that her husband had never before seen on it. She dropped her work, and leaning forward laid her hand on his, as she spoke eagerly, impulsively, as if moved by some hidden feeling strong enough to overcome the habit of years of silence and repression. "Oh, John," she cried, "I want the children to be happy with us. The Lord has never given us a child of our own—" There was a look of yearning motherhood now in the dim blue eyes—"and I feel as if He was sendin' these two to me—to us—not only to be fed an' clothed, but to be *loved*. Young things need some petting, John. I don't believe a little of it would hurt them."

She gazed wistfully into his face. She looked in truth, as if a little petting would not hurt her, but John Ramsay hardened his heart against that pleading voice and those wistful eyes—though his own voice was a trifle less gruff as he answered,

"I ain't sayin' anything against your lovin' 'em, but as to the pettin' an' coddlin', once for all—I *will not* have it. I'll be master in my own house—mind that! And if I find that you're a spoilin' 'em—out they go! That's all I've got to say. You an' me hain't never quarreled, Mary, an' I hope we ain't goin' to begin at this late day."

As he threw aside his paper and stood up, she looked up at him, wondering if he realized that it was because she had always given way to him in everything, that there had been no quarrels between them, but she made no reply. He went into the entry for his overcoat, and when he came back to the kitchen, she had his lantern lighted.

It seemed to her that he had never before been so deliberate in his movements, and she drew a long breath of relief when the door closed behind him, and through the window she saw the lantern light bobbing along as he carried it to the barn. She kept her eyes on the clock as she strained her ears, and when she heard her husband drive out of the yard she exclaimed aloud,—

"It did seem to me that he'd never get off, an' now I don't believe that he'll be at the station when the train gets there, an' what *will* those poor children think! I'd rather have walked every step of the way to the station myself, dark as 'tis, than to've had them get there an' find nobody waitin' for 'em--the poor, dear souls!"

She picked up her sewing and sat down with

it, but she could not work. She knew that her husband could not have gotten half-way to the station, and the clock already pointed to half-past seven. She pictured to herself the two children reaching the lonely little country station and finding no one there to meet them, and she wondered anxiously what they would do.

Meantime her husband was urging his horse to his best speed, but he knew that the train if on time, would reach the station before he could possibly get there.

“’Twon’t hurt ’em to wait there a few minutes,” he thought, “ain’t nothin’ goin’ to happen to ’em ’cept a little tryin’ of their patience, an’ that’ll do ’em good. ’Spect Mary thinks I’m terrible hard on her an’ on them, but I know what I’m about an’ I know what she is. She’s a good woman—Mary is—ain’t a better one in this State, but she’s got her weaknesses same’s other folks has, an’ I know as well ’s if I’d seen her adoin’ it, how she’d like to fuss over them young ones. She’d run her legs off to wait on ’em, an’ starve herself to get dainties for ’em—if I hadn’t put my foot down the way I did to-night.”

He chuckled softly as he recalled the masterful stand he had taken with his wife. Just then he heard the whistle of the train as it slowed up at the curve near the station, and he had still half a mile to go.

“Come, jog along, Peter,” he said to his horse.

"Don't want to keep 'em waitin' too long—this time."

As the train approached the station, two of the passengers peered eagerly out of the windows, but they could see nothing except a glimmering light here and there shining out from the dense blackness of the night.

"Oh, Max, what shall we do if there is nobody here to meet us?" the girl said to her brother, as the train slowed up.

She was a little thing with rather a plain face, but there was something very winning in the clear straightforward glance of her gray eyes, and her face brightened wonderfully when she smiled. She looked about fifteen, and her brother a year or two older. His dark eyes had a grave, almost somber, expression, but more than one of the passengers had noticed his pleasant manner toward his sister.

He was gathering up the luggage as she spoke, and as he picked up the last thing, he answered cheerily.

"There's sure to be some one here for us. You know Aunt Mary wrote us that the house was two miles from the station. Here we are!" as the conductor called "Hamilton." "Let me go ahead so I can help you off."

The two stepped on to the platform and looked about them. Evidently they were the only ones leaving the train at this place, for it went on

almost immediately after their trunk had been tumbled out of the baggage car. A wave of loneliness and homesickness swept over the girl as the train disappeared, leaving them alone on the platform, except for the station-master who stood near the door with a lantern in his hand. She clung nervously to her brother's arm, and peered anxiously into the surrounding darkness. The man locked the station door and then walked towards them and looked at them curiously.

"Expectin' somebody to meet ye?" he inquired.

"Yes," the boy answered. "Do you know Mr. John Ramsay?"

"Yes, indeed," was the prompt reply, "Know him like a book. You some of his folks?"

"Yes, and I can't understand why he didn't come or send for us."

"Did he say he'd be here to meet ye?"

"Yes."

"Then he will, you can depend on that. John Ramsay never goes back on his word. He'd come if he had to foot it all the way."

"But it's queer that he didn't meet the train, isn't it?" the boy asked uneasily.

The station-master grinned. "Wal' I do' know's 'tis, seein' it's John Ramsay. *He's* queer ye know—someways—but he'll come if he agreed to. You've only got to wait here till he does come, so good-night to ye.

"Oh—is he going to leave us alone here in the

dark, Max?" whispered the girl as the man turned his back on them, and her brother called out hastily,—

"But look here—can't you stay until Mr. Ramsay does come? It wouldn't be very pleasant for my sister to wait here in the dark."

"Oh I don't mind stayin' round here a spell if you're 'fraid," responded the station-master, turning back towards them.

The taunt did not disturb Max Dale in the least.

"I guess you didn't think *I* was afraid," he answered quietly. "I was thinking of my sister. We've been traveling all day and she's pretty well used up."

"I s'pect she is," the man replied in a more kindly tone. Leaning forward he listened intently for a moment, then added, "There's a team of some sort comin'. I reckon it's your kerridge."

"Oh, I do hope so!" murmured the girl, as again she strained her eyes into the darkness.

The rattle of wheels could be heard distinctly now, and a moment later an open wagon came within the circle of light thrown by the station-master's lantern.

"Hello! These my passengers?" called a deep rough voice, as the man on the platform remarked,—

"Seems to me you're rather behind time, ain't ye, Ramsay?"

The boy stepped up to the wagon.

"Are you Uncle John?" he asked.

"I reckon that's what you'll call me," was the cool response. "Step right in. Pete's in a hurry to get back to his stable an' he won't stand long."

"Can you take our trunk?" the boy asked.

"Oh—you've got a trunk too, have ye?" said the farmer, eying the bag and valises that Max was holding. "Um—m, well—I s'pose we can stow your trunk in back here. Say, Brown—lend a hand here, will ye? I guess you'n the boy between ye can get it in the wagon without my help, can't ye?"

Max dropped his satchel and bag on the platform and helped to lift the heavy trunk, then the other baggage was piled on top of it.

"Now step in—the girl first," said the farmer. "It'll be rayther a tight squeeze—three of us on one seat. Maybe you'd rather sit behind on your trunk," the farmer added to Max.

"Oh no—sit here, Max. There's room enough," cried the girl hastily, trying to take up as little space herself as possible.

"Well, get in somewhere!" exclaimed Ramsay impatiently, "or Pete 'll be off without ye."

Max squeezed himself in beside his sister.

"Good night, and much obliged to you," he called to the man on the platform, as old Pete started off with a jerk that came near upsetting

the boy, perched as he was on the very end of the seat.

It was a rough country road over which they drove. There was no moon, and by the faint light of the stars the young strangers could see little save dark dense masses of trees, and now and then a farmhouse with its glimmering light that seemed but to emphasize the surrounding darkness.

Max asked one or two questions, but the answers he received were so brief and curt that he soon relapsed into silence. On and on they went through the night, an endless way it seemed to the tired girl. The air was keen and sharp and she shivered and leaned against her brother.

"Cold, Helen?" he asked, but she made no reply. He suspected that she was past talking, and he put his arm about her tenderly. In spite of herself, two or three big tears rolled down her cheeks. She thought that Max would not know that she was crying, but one drop splashed on his hand, and he drew her closer and covered her fingers with his own.

When at last old Pete turned into a yard, Helen drew a long breath of relief. At least this weary ride was over, and Aunt Mary could not well be less agreeable than her husband. There was the hope that she would be very different.

She was standing in the doorway as the carriage drove up—a worn, slender figure in her plain

narrow dress and big white apron. She held out her arms as Helen went up the steps and the girl with a little sob, half of weariness and half of glad relief, hid her face on her aunt's shoulder.

"Poor child—poor tired little girl," murmured Mrs. Ramsay, "Come right in, dear."

She led the girl into the kitchen and drew forward a rocking chair and pushed her gently into it; before she turned to welcome Max.

"You ain't too big to be kissed—just once, are you?" she said to him, as she laid her thin hand in his big strong one.

"No, indeed, Aunt Mary," he answered heartily as he bent his head and kissed her check.

Her eyes filled as she looked at him, but they were tears of gladness, and in her heart she was saying exultantly, "These are *my* children—my very own!"

Usually it took John Ramsay quite a long time to unharness, and to lock up the barn, but he must have worked more rapidly than usual on this occasion, for in a very few minutes he came in, and having hung his coat and hat in the entry, he seated himself in a straight-backed chair which he tilted back on two legs against the wall—and watched his wife and the strangers. The moment that his steps sounded on the porch a change came over Mrs. Ramsay. She seemed to draw into herself, all the affectionate tenderness of her first welcome disappeared, and she sat down at a

little distance from the table where she had seated the brother and sister, and, a moment before, had been hospitably urging them to eat.

Max needed no urging. He ate with the hearty appetite of a healthy, growing boy, but Helen could not eat. She drank a glass of milk, and then sat there wishing that her brother would get through so that they might go away by themselves. Mrs. Ramsay made several timid attempts to carry on a conversation, but her husband did not open his lips, and his presence seemed to have a depressing effect upon the other three.

As Max pushed back his chair and rose from the table, he glanced at his sister and then said,—

“Aunt Mary, I think Helen will be glad to get to bed. She’s had a long hard day on the cars.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get your lamps,” Mrs. Ramsay replied, rising hastily.

She took two small kerosene lamps from the mantelpiece, and lighting them, led the way upstairs. The boy turned in the doorway to say,—

“Good night, Uncle John.”

The farmer stared at him for a second, then growled a seemingly unwilling response.

In silence, then, the brother and sister followed Mrs. Ramsay up the narrow, uncarpeted stairs.

“This is your room,” she said to Helen, throwing open a door.

It was a small, whitewashed room with a sloping roof on one side and two dormer windows.

The floor was bare except for a braided rag mat in front of the bed. The bed itself was covered with a gay patchwork coverlet, and there was a small table, a washstand and a couple of chairs. It was a bare-looking little place enough, but it was as neat and clean as hands could make it.

"Your brother will be right across the entry so you needn't feel lonesome," Mrs. Ramsay added.

She turned away, then turned back hastily and gave the girl a hurried kiss. "I hope you'll be happy with us—dear," she said in a low wistful tone.

Helen looked at her gratefully and tried to answer brightly, but her voice failed. A tremulous little smile was all she could give in response just then, and with a good-night to Max the little woman went quickly away.

When she was gone Helen shut the door, and turned to her brother.

"Oh, Max," she cried, "*must* we stay here? It's so homesicky!"

She looked at him so appealingly that his heart ached for her—this little sister whom he had promised his dying mother that he would always love and care for. He put his arms tenderly about her and drew her head down on his shoulder.

"There—cry it all out, little girl, and then you'll feel better," he said, his voice full of sympathy.

But she did not cry. She gave one or two choking, tearless sobs, and then she drew herself away and sat down.

"I know there isn't any other place. We've got to stay here," she said drearily. "But that man—I can't call him uncle—he's dreadful, Max!"

"I shouldn't wonder if he turns out to be a great deal better than he appeared to-night, Nellie. It's likely he's rather rough and hard, as a good many farmers are, but he may have a heart of gold under it all. At any rate we mustn't forget that he has offered us a home when we had really no claim on him."

"Yes, that is so," the girl answered thoughtfully. Then she looked up and smiled at him—a smile that almost transfigured her face—so bright and sweet it was. "There, Max, I won't be a baby any more," she said bravely. "I have you, anyhow, and as long as we are together things can't be very bad, and I'm going to begin to-morrow morning to 'hunt for sunbeams' as mamma used to say. Come now, let's peep into your room."

His room was even barer than hers, for besides the bed and one chair and a little stand, it held nothing.

"Not even a washstand!" gasped the girl. "Oh, Max, what will you do?"

"Borrow yours to-morrow morning, after you've used it," he answered lightly, "and after to

tomorrow we'll see. 'Suffieient unto the day,' you know. Now get to bed as quickly as you can, little girl, and a good rest to you."

But when his sister had gone back to her own room, and long after her light was out, the boy sat at his window looking out into the darkness and wondering what their life here was to be. He had been as little attracted as his sister, by John Ramsay's surly manner. Would it be possible, he wondered, for him to get along pleasantly with such a man? Yet there was no other home open to them, for the uncle with whom they had been living had recently died, and John Ramsay's wife was their nearest living relative, and the only one who seemed to want them.

With a strong effort, the boy at last threw off the vague misgivings and troubled thoughts that seemed to press upon him like an actual weight.

"I'm strong and well," he said to himself. "I can work, and I will, and the day shall come when I'll have a home of my own—mine and Helen's."

He threw open his window and looked out. It was late September and the night wind brought to him the spicy fragrance of the pines mingled with the moist fresh smell of the earth and the pungent odor of the dead leaves that already lay in drifts about the yard. How still it was, and how vast and measureless seemed the space about him, and how dense the darkness! He looked

up at the stars, and thought again of his mother, and of the promise he had given her.

“I will,” he repeated solemnly. “I will care for the little sister, always, and I’ll do my very best here, even if things *are* hard.”

And things were to be hard there for the boy. He was soon to find that out.

CHAPTER II

A TRYING DAY.

A TAP on her door awakened Helen the next morning, and then the door was pushed open and her aunt's voice called softly,—

“Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. Wake your brother, and don't be late if you can help it.”

The girl sat up in bed. It was so dark that it seemed to her as if it must be the middle of the night, but when she opened her shutters she saw that the sun was just rising. The exquisite tints of the soft floating bits of clouds above the dark, pine-clad hills were so lovely that she longed to stop and watch them, but remembering her aunt's injunction not to be late, she called her brother and then dressed as hastily as she could. She had to dress almost in the dark, for if there were any matches in the room she did not know where they were, and button-hook and hair ribbons, and comb and brush, all had to be found by her fumbling fingers without a light.

She was just brushing out her long hair, pre-

paratory to braiding it, when she heard Max's voice at the door,—

“ Good-morning, have you used Pears' soap ?” he quoted gaily. “ Because if you have, I'd like to borrow your washbowl.”

“ Oh, dear ! Why *didn't* you wait till I got my hair done ?” she cried impatiently, as she dropped the thick brown mass, and ran to empty the water from the bowl that she had just used.

“ Beg pardon, ma' am,” Max responded, with a laugh in his voice, “ but in this light—I mean dark—I couldn't *really* see what you were doing, you know.”

“ Of course you couldn't, you blessed boy,” she answered with quick penitence. “ Here—here's the bowl and the pitcher, and Aunt Mary says we mustn't be late. Isn't it an unearthly hour for breakfast though ! If I hadn't looked out of the window, I should think it was still last night.”

Five minutes later, the two stumbled down the dark stairs and across the entry to the kitchen. The farmer and his hired man sat at the table, eating breakfast by lamplight. Mrs. Ramsay was at the stove frying buckwheat cakes. She looked up with a smile as they entered, and motioned towards the table and they took their seats there. They both said “ Good-morning ” to the farmer, but a slight nod was his only response.

A fresh white cloth covered the table, and

small towels were laid under the plates of the two men. A dish of fried ham and eggs was before Mr. Ramsay, but he did not offer any to the new-comers, and when his wife brought a plate of smoking cakes to the table she passed them to her husband and the man before she did to Helen and Max. Then she helped the latter liberally to the ham and eggs, and filled their glasses with milk, but it was all done in silence.

Helen's brave resolutions of the night before seemed to melt away as she sat at this silent breakfast table. She needed the food, but it choked her and she could not eat. She wondered how her brother could.

When the farmer and his man pushed back their chairs and left the room, the girl drew a breath of relief, but she noticed that as Mr. Ramsay passed his wife, he spoke one word to her in a low, emphatic tone, and she thought that the word was, "remember."

As the two men went out, Helen looked up and there was a note of unconscious relief in her voice as she exclaimed,—

"Have you had your breakfast, Aunt Mary?"

"Not yet. I'll have it presently as soon's I've fried another griddleful of cakes. But you ain't eatin' anything, Helen, what's the matter?" As she asked the question, Mrs. Ramsay gave a quick, troubled glance at the girl's face and at her untouched plate.

"I guess I'm not hungry yet—it's so early," Helen answered rising and going over to the stove. "Let me fry those," she added, "I know enough to do that, and you sit down with Max and eat your breakfast." She took the cake-turner from her aunt's hand, and pushed her gently towards the table.

"Come along, auntie," Max called cheerfully, as he too pushed back his chair. "I've finished my breakfast, and a good big one too. Now, Helen, you just sit down with Aunt Mary and eat something. *I'm* going to fry those cakes."

He snatched an apron from a nail on the wall and tied it awkwardly over his coat. "Give me the flapjack now, and see if I'm not an A No. 1 cook he added.

With a laughing glance at him, Helen surrendered the cake-turner and went back to the table. Her aunt was looking anxiously at the impromptu cook."

"He'll let 'em burn, won't he?" she said doubtfully to the girl.

"Burn? Not a bit of it." Max deftly slipped a beautifully browned cake from the griddle to a plate as he spoke. "There!" he added triumphantly, as a moment later he set a pile of smoking cakes before her, "aren't those just as nice as any you've fried? I've served apprenticeship at this business camping out with the boys in vacation. Have another griddleful put on?"

"Yes, but don't forget—" began Mrs. Ramsay. Max interrupted her, laughingly, "to grease the griddle!" He finished the sentence in a tone of triumph, as he seized a bowl of lard.

"I guess you know what you're about," his aunt answered in a relieved tone, as she helped Helen to some of the hot cakes, and the breakfast proceeded merrily,

"I don't know when I've eaten so much." Mrs. Ramsay said, when she rose from the table.

Max made her a profound bow, his long apron sweeping the floor as he did so.

"Thanks very much," he said, "The cook appreciates the compliment.

The little woman stood looking at him with such a light in her eyes as had not brightened them in many a year. Helen crept up behind her and laid her fresh young cheek against her aunt's faded one as she laughingly watched her brother.

At that moment the door opened, and John Ramsay stood in the doorway looking at the group. There was a hard gleam in his narrow eyes and a threatening tone in his voice, as he said slowly and harshly to his wife,

"So—this is a fine beginning! Seem's to me your memory's mighty short, Mary."

Max glanced at his aunt. In a flash the brightness died out of her face, and it seemed to him to actually fade and wither before his eyes, so quick and complete was the change that passed over it.

A feeling of deep pity and sympathy for her made the lad's heart swell within him as he involuntarily took a step towards her, but she did not look at him. She moved a trifle, unconsciously shaking off Helen's affectionate touch, and looked pleadingly at her husband.

"'Twas just a little frolic, John. Max has been frying cakes for us," she said hastily.

For a second, which seemed an age, the man stood in the doorway with that half-scornful, half-threatening gaze fixed upon her, then he turned to Max.

"You're ruther big to be foolin' round in petticoats," he remarked, with a glance at the apron that the boy had totally forgotten. "You're pretty near a man grown. Don't you think it's 'bout time you begun to work for your livin'?"

The boy's dark cheeks flushed hotly, more at the tone than the words. He drew himself up to his full height, and his clear dark eyes looked straight into those of the man, as he answered quickly and emphatically,

"*I mean* to earn my living and my sister's, sir, and I am ready to go to work this minute."

"Come along, then," returned the farmer shortly, and without another word he turned and tramped heavily across the porch.

Max flashed a quick reassuring smile at his sister, who stood looking after the man with flaming cheeks and indignant eyes.

"Don't you mind, Aunt Mary—it's all right," he said hastily to his aunt, as he flung off the trailing apron, snatched up his cap, and ran after the farmer.

"What can you do?" was the question that met him as he overtook John Ramsay half-way across the yard.

He answered quietly, "I've never lived on a farm, Uncle John; but I'm not lazy, and I'm ready to learn—if you'll tell me what to do and how to do it."

"Humph!" grunted the man, and tramped on in silence, the boy following, to the field where the hired man—Tim Barney—was digging potatoes.

"Stand here and watch Tim, and when you think you know how to dig potatoes, go to work and do it."

Such were the brief instructions given him. He obeyed them. He watched Tim open two or three hills, take out the potatoes, and drop them on a pile already dug. Then he picked up a hoe and did likewise.

"It was seven o'clock when he began work and he kept at it steadily until the horn summoned them all to the house for dinner at noon.

The farmer had spent the morning plowing up the hills on another part of the field, where he could keep an eye on his two assistants. Now he took the horse from the plow and led him to the barn, and then he and the hired man washed their

hands and faces in a tin basin that stood by the pump on the back porch. Max followed their example, but having done so he ran hastily up to his room to brush his hair and his clothes before he sat down to the table.

His steady, uncomplaining work in the potato field had mollified John Ramsay somewhat, but it always provoked him to have any one late at the table.

"When I'm ready to set down, other folks have got to be ready" was his unchanging rule, and now Max had broken this rule twice on this first day. Ramsay made up his mind that this must be stopped. So now when the boy took his seat at the table, the farmer looked at him and remarked slowly,—

"You were late to breakfast and you're late to dinner. I want you to understand that I expect the folks that eat at my table to set down to it when I do."

He waited for no response, at once resuming his meal. But again he had effectually spoiled Helen's appetite, and at this fresh reprimand, the boy's mouth hardened, and a sullen anger began to smolder in his heart.

"No use trying to suit him," he thought "If it wasn't for Helen—" but as he looked up he caught a glance of loving sympathy from Helen, and smiling back at her, he tried resolutely to banish his indignation.

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning for Max, and as the slow hours dragged along, he grew very tired. He had never been used to steady hard work of any kind. His hands were blistered and his back aching intolerably before the afternoon was half gone. But he made no complaint. He was determined to do his best to satisfy John Ramsay, although even so early he began to doubt the possibility of satisfying him.

In the middle of the afternoon, Tim suddenly shouted "Hi!" and when the farmer looked up from across the field Tim pointed to a man who was coming down from the house. Ramsay left his plow in the ground and went over to meet the new-comer, and the two walked back to the house together.

As soon as they were fairly out of sight, Tim Barney flung down his hoe, drew a pipe from his pocket, and lighting it sat deliberately down with his back against a barrel of potatoes and began to smoke. Max glanced at him, as he straightened himself up for a moment to ease his aching back, then set to work again. Tim watched him in silence for a while, then between two puffs he remarked coolly,—

"You're a fool, boy!"

Max gave him a quick, steady look, but made no reply.

"I say you're a fool!" repeated the man in a louder tone.

"I heard you the first time," the boy returned.

"And you don't care why I say so?"

"No, I don't," answered Max.

The man looked at him with a shade more of respect, but he continued scornfully, "You'll know more when you're a few years older, my boy. You'll have learned by that time not to work when ye don't have to."

Max pulled the last potato out of the hill and passed on to the next one.

"Oh, I understand," Tim called tauntingly; "you're afraid I'll tell the old man if you loaf a little."

The boy cast a disdainful glance at him as he replied shortly, "I'm not afraid of you or of anything that you can do."

The cool independence of the boy exasperated Tim Barney. He sprang up and strode over the soft earth and faced Max.

"Oh, ye aint, heh! We'll see about that!" he cried, then a sudden thought came to him, a reflection from his own small mind, and he added hastily, "Mebbe you mean to tell the old man that I stopped for a smoke?"

To this the boy made no reply whatever. His scornful silence infuriated the man the more. He grasped Max by the collar and whirled him roughly around, shouting, "We'll see if ye won't," but then catching sight of Mr. Ramsay just parting from his visitor at the road, Tim hastily stuffed

his pipe into his pocket and fell to work with a great show of industry, but as he did so he muttered in a threatening tone, "I'll settle with you later an' I'll make you wish—" The sentence ended in a low growl of which Max could distinguish nothing.

The affair did not trouble the boy, but it added to the dreariness and misery of this first day in his new home—for by this time it was actual misery to him to move his arms, or to stoop to pick up the potatoes. Still he worked doggedly on, too weary now even to look up, when at last John Ramsay came and stood near him. The farmer's keen eyes noted the weariness in the boyish face, the tired droop of his shoulders, and he said abruptly,

"You've worked long enough for one day—better stop now."

Too exhausted even to answer, Max dropped his hoe and walked stiffly across the field and back to the house.

The farmer watched him for a moment, then his mouth widened in a grim smile as he remarked to Tim, "That's a plucky youngster. He's ready to drop but he wouldn't give in till I told him to stop."

"Huh!" grunted Tim, "you didn't have your eye on him while ye was up the house though."

"Did he shirk then?" questioned Ramsay sharply.

"There was only one feller a workin' in this per-

tater patch while you was gone," replied Tim with perfect truth.

Ramsay's face darkened. "So—an' he let me believe that he worked right along. I won't forget that," he said, "I hate a loafer, but I hate a sneak worse."

And the man who was both a loafer and a sneak when he dared to be—laughed in his sleeve and assured himself mentally that he had "served out that high-headed youngster for once."

Max went into the house and dropped wearily into the first chair that he came to. The kitchen was in nicest order and his aunt sat cutting carpet rags into strips with a pair of big shears while Helen was sewing the strips together and rolling them into a huge ball.

They both looked up as the boy appeared, and Helen sprang up scattering her lapful of rags on the floor, as she ran over to him crying out,—

"Why, Max, what is the matter? Are you sick?"

He roused himself and answered as cheerfully as he could, "No, not sick a bit only a little tired. You know I haven't been used to farm work," he added apologetically to his aunt who was looking anxiously at him across the two big baskets that held her cut and uncut rags.

"Can't I get ye some ginger tea—or something?" she asked in a troubled tone.

He looked over at her and laughed a little at that.

“No, I’ll be all right after I’ve rested a bit,” he made answer. “I’ll go up-stairs and get off some of the dirt.”

He pulled himself slowly up and walked as steadily as he could across the kitchen and up to his room, but once there, he shut the door and flung himself on the bed with a weary sigh.

Helen’s eyes were full of tears as she picked up her scattered rags and began to sew again. She said nothing, but her aunt cast more than one anxious glance at the sober face and downcast eyes. At last she leaned over towards the girl and said earnestly,

“Child—I think it’s just as he said. He ain’t used to steady work—hard work too, and he’ll be all right when he’s rested.”

Helen looked up then. “But, Aunt Mary—will he have to work so hard all the time? He’s only a boy, you know—he isn’t seventeen yet,” she said with a pleading note in her voice that sorely hurt Mrs. Ramsay’s gentle heart. She did so long to make those two happy, and here was Helen grieving and troubled, and Max worn out with hard work the very first day, and she—she could not gather the girl in her arms and comfort her as she longed to do. All this was in her dim eyes as she looked up, but Helen could not read it there. She spoke quietly,—

“Helen—I want you—and Max—to understand and not feel hard towards your uncle if, just at

first, he seems hard and inconsiderate. He's never had children to—to—" she faltered a little—"soften him and make him realize what girls and boys need and like. His mother died when he was a baby and his father was hard with him, and he doesn't know how to make allowances; but he's a good man, and if Max tries to please him—and I know he will—I don't think he'll be harsh with him after a while. Only tell Max to be always open and honest with him, no matter what happens. John can't endure anything underhanded."

"But, Aunt Mary—Max is *never* underhanded! He's as honest and straightforward as a boy can possibly be!" exclaimed Helen earnestly, and with a little touch of indignation in her tone.

"I'm sure of that, child," Mrs Ramsay answered hastily, "but I warned ye because I do so *want* Max to get along well with his uncle. It will make things so much pleasanter," she added, with a sigh. After a moment's silence she went on. "He must have seen that Max was tired and sent him in, for he and Tim won't be in for an hour yet."

"Auntie, will you mind if I run up and see Max for a few minutes. I've hardly seen him to-day you know, and we've been used to being so much together," Helen said, as she laid in one of the baskets the big ball she had just wound.

"Why, of course—run right along, child," Mrs. Ramsay answered, and Helen disappeared.

Her brother heard her swift, light step on the stair, and he was at his trunk looking for a clean collar when she reached his room, but her quick eyes noted that he had been lying down and she guessed that he had only risen when he heard her coming.

"Max—I shall *hate* him if he makes you work so hard," she exclaimed stormily.

He turned with a smile. "Uncle John is all right," he said, "it's only that I'm such a duffer. I expect any fellow of my age in this neighborhood would have done a great deal more than I've done to day and thought nothing of it, and I shan't mind it after I get broken in."

She looked at him earnestly.

"Really, Max?" she questioned doubtfully.

"Yes, really, little girl" was his cheery response.

"But Max—even if you do get so that you can work hard without being all used up, it will be horrid if you have to do it all the time. I thought we were going to have such lovely times here, walking and driving, and—" Her voice faltered and her sentence trailed off into tremulous silence. It was all so disappointing—so different from their happy, care-free life with Uncle Henry.

Helen turned away and going into her own room stood with unseeing eyes gazing off at the hills—her heart full of dismay and wretchedness as she looked forward to years of hard thankless

toil for her brother. Nor was the prospect for herself much brighter—for, seeing how steadily her aunt had labored from early dawn until now, she foresaw that she would be expected to do likewise, only, she said to herself, “It will be so much pleasanter for me than for Max, because I can work with Aunt Mary, and I’m sure she wouldn’t be hard on anybody unless Uncle John made her; while Max will have to work with him, and he is just *horrid*! I never can like him—never—I know I can’t! There he comes now and I must run down and help Aunt Mary get the supper for him. Ugh! How *could* she ever marry such a man?”

Helen was all unused to concealing her feelings, but she did not realize how plainly her face expressed them. John Ramsay was not a man of fine feeling, nor was he particularly sensitive, but even he could not fail to read aright the expression of dislike on the girl’s frank face as she looked at him, or to understand the cold unfriendly tone in which she answered once when he spoke to her. He did not speak to her again that day, but he noticed how her face changed when she turned to his wife; he resented the difference and a feeling of jealous dislike awoke in his heart. It made him harsher than usual in his manner even to his wife.

“Guess I can do as I please in my own house,” was his thought, “and there ain’t no young ones

goin' to set my wife against me—not if I know it. 'F this girl an' boy don't walk a bee line, an' a line o' my own chalkin' too—out they go! That's all there is about it, an' that I'll stand to, sure's my name's John Ramsay !”

Yet he felt vaguely dissatisfied with somebody else—could it be himself? John Ramsay was not accustomed to be dissatisfied with himself, and it made him uncomfortable; and when he was uncomfortable he was very apt to be ugly. He held his paper before his face as he sat by the table after supper, but he was not reading—he was thinking. Also, he was watching his wife and Helen as they cleared the table and washed the dishes. They seemed to find plenty to talk about, those two, and when had his wife looked so bright and happy before? He watched her jealously. She never followed him about with her eyes as she did this girl whom she had not known two days ago.

John Ramsay could not remember when he had felt so uncomfortable before. He was unhappy, but he did not know it, and so he sat with a gloomy face, planning to make somebody else unhappy; and when his wife asked him a question he gave her a short reply accompanied by such an unpleasant look that she shrank into sudden silence and did not open her lips again until he went out to lock the barn. As Helen looked at her with eyes full of indignant sympathy, it would have

been difficult to convince the girl that within twenty-four hours she would be thinking of John Ramsay with her heart overflowing with deepest gratitude, but so it was to be.

CHAPTER III.

TWO VISITORS IN THE BARN.

MAX slept heavily through the night, but it seemed to him that he had barely closed his eyes when he heard his sister's voice at his door. In spite of his resolution he could not suppress a groan as he dragged himself slowly out of bed.

"I wonder if day-laborers feel like this?" he thought with a new touch of sympathy for toiling humanity.

But though every movement gave him a fresh twinge, he managed to dress himself and get down to the kitchen just as the farmer came in from the barn.

Ramsay's keen eyes noticed the boy's slow, stiff movements; he could not fully appreciate what he was suffering, because he himself had always been used to hard work, but he appreciated it sufficiently to treat Max with a sort of rough consideration which in him was rare enough to make his wife glance at him more than once with pleased surprise.

When the farmer rose from the breakfast-table,

Max also rose, took his cap, and, without a word, followed his uncle from the room.

"Well, are you ready for another day in the potater patch?" questioned the man, pausing on the porch and looking sharply into the face of the boy.

"Yes, for that or anything else you want me to do," Max answered quietly, though he groaned inwardly at the thought of the potato field with its endless hills to be opened and emptied.

"Guess you might's well work there as anywhere," the farmer replied. "Best way to cure a lame back is to give it another dose of the job that made it lame," and he walked on to the field where Tim was already at work.

It seemed to Max at first as if he could not possibly toil there even for an hour, but there was about him a sort of dogged perseverance that would not let him give up, and again he opened the hills and pulled out the potatoes through the long hours that seemed to him endless.

About ten o'clock, Mrs. Ramsay came part way down the lane and called her husband. He went over and spoke to her, and then shouted back to Tim,

"I'll be gone for half an hour or so. You an' the boy can keep right on with the work."

Mrs. Ramsay was already hurrying back to the house, and her husband followed her slowly. The barn stood between the house and the potato field.

its door being on the side facing the house. It was a very large barn, with stalls for the horses and cows in the basement. The main floor and the loft above were piled with the winter store of hay.

John Ramsay followed his wife only until he was out of sight of Max and Tim. Then he entered the barn and climbed to the loft, where there was a window coated with dust and cobwebs. This window looked towards the potato field, and the farmer proceeded to make himself comfortable on the hay in such a position that he could see what the man and boy there were doing.

"Don't like spyin' on 'em in this fashion," he muttered half aloud in a dissatisfied tone, "but I've got to know in the beginnin' whether that boy is a sneak or not. I've found before now that it's best to take Tim Barney's stories with a grain o' salt, an' I ruther mistrust that he's full as fond of loafin' as he is of workin'; but all the same he may have told the truth this time, an' if Max shirked yesterday he'll do it again to-day sure, for I c'n see that it's about as much as he can do to stand."

He leaned over and peered through the dusty window pane.

"Humph! Only one a workin' sure enough, an' that one ain't Tim Barney neither. Now where *is* Tim? He can't be fur off—Ah! There's smoke risin' from behind them barrels. Tim's got his

pipe lighted already. Now we'll see how long he sets there."

With a chuckle at the success of his plan, the farmer took out his old silver watch and held it in his hand. Five—ten—fifteen—twenty minutes slipped away before Tim resumed work. The farmer laughed again.

"He thinks the half hour's 'bout up, an' time for me to be back," he said to himself, "Wal' he's right, but Mr. Tim Barney'll hear from this; not to-day maybe, but some day when I get good and ready to settle his business. An' as for the boy he's worked as steady as if I'd been right there the whole time. If Tim had only guessed that I told Mary to come down the lane an' call me at ten o'clock!"

He laughed once more as he lumbered heavily down the barn stairs, but there was no trace of amusement on his face when he again reached the field. He said nothing to Tim, but the man found him harder to suit than usual that morning.

At half-past eleven the farmer said to Max, "You can go up to the house now, an' you needn't work any more to-day. Give your back a rest till to-morrow."

The boy looked up in quick, pleased surprise.

"Oh, thank you, Uncle John," he said, heartily. "I'll try to do enough more to-morrow to make up."

"Ain't said I wanted any makin' up," growled the man, but there was a warm glow at his heart

as the boy's eyes looked at him with that glad light in them.

"I'm agoin' to like that chap," he said to himself, then swiftly came the thought, "But I've got to look out an' not spoil him," and he tried to harden his heart again, but he could not quite forget that grateful look in the dark eyes.

"Seems like it pays to shirk," grumbled Tim in a surly tone, as he gazed after the boy going slowly up the lane.

"Think so? You ought to know," was the farmer's cool response as he glanced from under his lowered brows at the man's sullen face.

"What d'ye mean by that?" questioned Tim defiantly.

"When did you smoke last?" was the counter question.

"Last night. Reckon I've got a right to smoke after workin' hours if I like," returned Tim with another quick glance at his employer's face.

"Last night?" repeated the farmer deliberately. "Queer—ain't it, that your pocket should be afire now?"

Tim clapped his hand hastily to his coat pocket. It was true enough. He had carelessly dropped his pipe in without emptying it, and it had smoldered there until now when, it had burned through the pocket and the lining of the coat. He cast a sheepish glance at the farmer.

"That's queer. Must a been spontaneous combustion, I reckon," he said.

"That's what I thought," responded Ramsay drily, and no further reference was made to the affair, but Tim blamed Max for it. "He's been tattlin'!" he told himself, "an' I'll make him sorry for it yet, sure's my name's Tim Barney."

Max went slowly back to the house. After the first glow of pleased surprise, he felt only a sort of dull relief in his release from work.

"Guess I'm too dead tired to care for anything," he thought listlessly, but he tried not to let Helen see how weary he was.

Helen was delighted when she learned that he was to have the rest of the day to himself. So was Mrs. Ramsay.

"I'm glad of it," she exclaimed heartily. "And Helen, you needn't do anything more after we get the dinner work out of the way. You have not had a chance yet to go over the farm and get acquainted with the place."

Helen flung her arms impulsively around the little woman's neck and kissed her.

"That's dear of you, Aunt Mary," she cried, then she turned to her brother. It was on her tongue's end to propose a walk over the farm and across the hills, but as she looked at his face she checked herself.

"What shall we do to celebrate, Max?" she asked gently, as Mrs. Ramsay left the room.

He looked at her with heavy eyes.

"I'm afraid I'll have to lie around and rest, Nellie," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry. I expect you'd like a walk?"

"Oh never mind my likes," she answered brightly. "I like whatever suits you to-day."

"Have you been to the barn yet?" he questioned.

"No."

"Suppose you explore that, then. It's a famous big one—and I can lounge on the hay meanwhile."

So after dinner, they went to the barn, where Max threw himself down on the sweet clean hay with a long sigh of satisfaction, while his sister explored the place from top to bottom and made acquaintance with old Pete and his mate Jack, and with the gentle Jersey cows and the two pretty fawn-colored calves. She rejoined her brother with her cheeks glowing and her eyes shining

"Oh, Max," she cried, "it's just lovely here, outside, I mean. From that high window up there I can see way over the hills to the blue mountains beyond; and there are two lakes in sight, one of them only a little way off yonder. I wonder if there's a boat on it."

"'Twon't do us much good if there is," he replied.

The brightness faded from the girl's eyes.

"But we shall have some playtime like this—don't you think?" she asked wistfully.

"Perhaps," but his tone was not hopeful.

Helen dropped down on the hay beside him. She was silent for a few minutes breaking a stalk of the dry grass into bits as her eyes wandered thoughtfully over what she could see through the open doors.

"Max," she began again, "don't you suppose we are to go to school here?"

He raised himself on his elbow and looked at her. "Why of course!" he answered, in a tone of surprise.

"I—didn't know," pursued Helen hesitatingly.

"Of *course* we must go," the boy repeated more decidedly as if battling some sudden fear in his own mind. "The idea of stopping school at sixteen—or fifteen, for you!"

"I know—it would be just dreadful!" she replied, "but I didn't know how Uncle John would feel about it—and, I suppose we've got to do whatever he says."

Max was silent, a shadow—not of weariness now—gathering in his eyes.

"If I thought—" he began, but his sister interrupted him hastily.

"What was that? I've heard it two or three times since I've been sitting here—a kind of a rustling noise over in that corner."

"A hen probably," returned her brother, with

a careless glance towards the corner. "I saw one somewhere over there when we first came in. They like to steal nests in the hay, you know."

"I guess that was it, then." Helen answered. "You were saying—?"

"If I thought—" Max began again, "that we were to have no more schooling, I don't know as I *could* stay here, Helen."

"But what else could we do, Max? And besides, Aunt Mary is so good to us, and so glad to have us here! It seems as if it would be wrong not to stay for her sake—don't you think so?"

"Perhaps so. You know I haven't seen so much of her as you have, and as for Uncle John—I really don't feel now under any obligation to stay on his account," Max ended moodily, as he picked up a straw and chewed it in an abstracted fashion.

"But we've nowhere else to go," Helen again reminded him, "and—no money of our own."

"No—and so I suppose we've *got* to stay here for a while; but you remember, Helen, that Uncle Henry's lawyer said that there might be a few hundreds left for us after all bills were paid, and if there should be, we might go to Boston and live. The money would pay our expenses until I could find something to do. I'm a big strong fellow, and I'd be sure to find a place somewhere."

Helen's face had brightened as he spoke.

"That would be just too lovely!" she cried eagerly. "Think of having a dear little home of our own—I wouldn't care how tiny it was—and earn our own living. Oh, Max!"

He laughed a little at her eager delight, but he added warningly,—

"Don't go to building air-castles, little girl. Remember, there may be no money left for us. Uncle Henry talked to me about it before he died, and said that he had hoped to leave us well provided for, but last year some company with which he had money invested, went all to pieces, and he lost almost everything that he had."

"Dear Uncle Henry!" murmured the girl, her eyes suddenly filling. "How good he was to us, Max!"

"Yes, always," assented her brother gravely.

Again both were silent for a little while; then Helen started and peered again into the dark corner.

"Oh, don't bother over that old hen, Nellie. Let her scratch there if she wants to," exclaimed Max impatiently. Then he went on, "That Tim Barney is a mean one. He'll make trouble for me if he can."

"But how can he, Max? You don't have anything to do with him, do you?"

"Not directly, but he seems set against me, and I feel sure he'll serve me some mean trick if he gets a chance."

"Well—we'll hope that he won't get the chance, then," Helen answered. "I can't bear those shifty red eyes of his; they make me think of a fox."

"He does look rather foxy, that's a fact—with his reddish hair and mustache, and his freckles," responded her brother laughingly.

Helen sat dreamily gazing off towards the hills for a while, then, turning to ask a question, she saw that Max was asleep. She looked at his tired face with an anxious expression in her eyes.

"Poor boy!" she was thinking, "it's a shame for Uncle John to make him work so hard. Oh, I *wish* we could go to Boston and live all by ourselves!"

After a while, she rose quietly so as not to disturb her brother, and went over to the doorway and stood there watching the cloud shadows on the hills. She had never before been in a hill country since she could remember, and her beauty-loving eyes were fascinated with the ever-changing loveliness.

Suddenly something moving attracted her attention. It was a pink sunbonnet bobbing along the road above the fence-rails. She watched it with the interest of one who found herself among entirely new surroundings.

"It's a girl—the first girl I've seen since we came," she thought, as the wearer of the sunbonnet came nearer. "She looks about my age, or maybe a little younger, but how poorly she is dressed.

I wonder if other girls about here look so. Why, I believe she's coming here."

The girl had caught sight of Helen in the doorway and, after a moment's hesitation, had turned and walked straight towards her. She was a slender little thing, with a face that seemed to Helen more vividly alive than any other face she had ever seen, though she could not tell what gave her that impression, unless it was the dancing blue eyes that appeared to take everything in at one swift glance. There was an independent tilt to the small nose and a decided set to the lips, indicating that their owner had a will of her own. For the rest—there was a thick powdering of freckles, and brown hair tumbling carelessly over the forehead and hanging in two braids, the ends of which reached just below the cape of the sun-bonnet, behind.

Her dress was a faded gingham, with two darker lines indicating "let out" tucks in the skirt, and her brown feet were bare.

She stepped into the barn doorway and leaned back with a negligent composed air against the side opposite to Helen.

"You're one of the new ones, I suppose," she began coolly.

Helen smiled involuntarily at the self-possessed air and tone.

"One of the new ones?" she repeated, "I don't think I know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. I mean—one of the new ones that have come to live here at the Ramsays'," the girl replied with a touch of impatience in her tone.

"Oh—yes, I'm one of the new ones, then," Helen answered, and waited with interest for her visitor's next remark. It came promptly.

"What's your name?"

"Helen Everett Dale."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"So'm I."

"Fifteen—are you! I thought you were younger than I," Helen said.

"He your brother?"

The question was accompanied by a swift gesture towards the sleeping boy. Helen wondered how the girl had discovered him, for she had not seemed to glance into the barn. She answered briefly, "Yes."

"What's he asleep for this time o' day? Is he lazy?" pursued the girl.

Helen resented this. She drew herself up with a proud little air, as she answered coldly and emphatically, "He's *anything* but lazy!"

The girl laughed at this, showing rather a large mouth redeemed by even white teeth.

"Hm-m! Thought I'd stir you up," she remarked serenely. Then as Helen made no reply, she added coolly, "I don't think you're very pretty—but you're good to look at. I like you."

Helen colored and looked half amused and half offended. The girl continued,—

“You don’t care to know who I am do you?”

“It was on Helen’s proud little tongue to reply, “No, I don’t,” but before the words were uttered she glanced once more into the small faces shadowed by the old sunbonnet, and something that she saw in the blue eyes—something of loneliness and wistfulness that lurked beneath the cool self-possession—made her hesitate an instant, and then say with a friendly smile,—

“Yes, I do care. Tell me your name, please.”

A swift change passed over the small freckled face under the pink sunbonnet. The daring half-mocking expression vanished from the blue eyes, and in its place there came a sweet tender look, almost appealing, Helen thought, and the clear voice had a softer tone as the girl answered,—

“I’m Sepha Dunlap, and I live right down there at the crossroads.”

“Oh—in that little white house among the trees?” exclaimed Helen. “It looks so pretty from my window. It’s the only house I can see from it.”

The girl’s face lighted vividly. “I’m glad you have that room!” she exclaimed.

“Why?” Helen asked wonderingly.

“O—’cause. You’re going to live here all the time, aren’t you?”

A shadow fell over Helen’s face at this ques-

tion. The quick blue eyes of the strange girl noted it as the answer came slowly,—

“I—don’t--know.”

“Mrs. Ramsay’s real good. Everybody likes *her*,” said the girl, with an emphasis on the pronoun that Helen did not fail to notice.

“I’m sure she is,” she answered quickly, then fearing some remark about Mr. Ramsay, she forestalled it by a hasty question,—

“Have you any brothers or sisters?”

Sepha nodded. “One brother—older’n yours; one sister—seven,” she answered briefly. Then she put another question. “You going to our school this winter?”

Helen shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said again, “I want to go.”

“I don’t go all the time,” Sepha continued “Sometimes I have to stay home and help Sarah Barnes. That’s on wash days and churning days, and any day when she’s lazy more’n usual. Sarah Barnes keeps house for us, since—mother died.”

A sweet tender light softened for a moment the blue eyes under the old bonnet. Helen was motherless. She understood that look, and yielding to a quick impulse she held out her hand.

“My mother, too, is in heaven,” she said in a low tone.—

Sepha laid her thin brown fingers in Helen’s. For once her ready tongue was silent, but her eyes were eloquent, and Helen felt strangely drawn

towards this queer, but certainly interesting new acquaintance.

"Our school begins two weeks from Monday, and we're going to have a new teacher this winter—a man. We've always had women teachers before. Most of 'em don't know much—our teachers. I can tangle 'em up quicker'n a wink in mental 'rithmetic."

Again the girl's face changed, kindling, evidently with mischievous recollections of experiences with former teachers.

"I don't like arithmetic nor algebra," replied Helen. "Max does—my brother—he most always stands first in his class in mathematics," she added proudly.

"You like him a lot, don't you?" remarked Sepha, her eyes studying the face of the girl before her.

"Like him? *Like* Max?" Helen exclaimed impulsively. "He's the very nicest boy in all the world, and I love him—" She stopped short, choking back the words that came crowding for utterance. "Like" Max, indeed, when he was all the world to her!

"I wish I could care for *my* brother that way," Sepha said in a low tone, and now she did not look at Helen, but turned her eyes away. The next moment she whirled around, and added, "My brother—Jack—doesn't *want* me to like him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Helen incredulously. "That can't be. I mean—you must be mistaken."

"No I'm not!" The girl shook her head in a very positive fashion. "He says it's silly to care for anybody."

In Helen's heart there sprang up a great pity for this girl, like herself motherless, but with a brother so unlike her own.

Sepha was looking down at the barn floor now, perhaps to hide her eyes. Suddenly she noticed Helen's neat button-boots and instantly she drew back her own foot and flashed a defiant glance at this other girl who seemed to her to have so much that she—Sepha—had not. Everything except—a mother. But that defiant glance met one so warm and friendly and sympathetic, that Sepha started for a moment as if she dared not believe what her eyes saw—then she turned and walked hastily off without another word.

Helen watched her with a little perplexed frown wrinkling her forehead.

"She's just the queerest girl I ever did see," she thought, "but I can't help liking her, and I'm so sorry for her."

Then she fell to thinking of the school question, wondering if she could summon courage to ask her aunt if she and Max could go this winter. She glanced back over her shoulder. Max was still sleeping. He looked as if he had not stirred since she left him. She walked slowly back and

sat down beside him on the hay. A moment later, she heard again a rustling in the corner.

"I'm just going to see if that *is* a hen. Perhaps Aunt Mary would want to know if there is a nest there," she thought, as she sprang lightly to her feet.

Something was surely moving among the hay, and now it was coming towards her. Helen stood still in a sort of idle curiosity for a second, then her eyes widened with horror, a horror that held her for an instant dumb and motionless as she saw a big brownish snake gliding rapidly across the floor. The next moment she was shaking Max and trying wildly to drag him away from the snake that was already coiling for a spring.

John Ramsay, with a hoe over his shoulder, was just entering the barn as Helen gave that frightened cry. It seemed as if he took a flying leap across the intervening space for, even as Max opened his eyes in bewildered surprise at his sudden awakening, the farmer was beside him, his hoe rose in the air and then descended with a *thud* that shook the floor, and severed the head of the reptile from its quivering body even while its ominous rattle still sounded on the air.

Then Helen dropped in a limp little heap beside her brother, while tears of mingled fright and relief rolled down her white cheeks. The boy's cheeks were pale too, as he looked from the dead snake to the farmer.

"A close call for you, that," said John Ramsay gravely.

"Was it a rattlesnake, Uncle John?" Max asked, with a quick catch in his breath.

"I should say so. Look at that tail."

The boy shivered as he realized the danger that he had so narrowly escaped.

"Oh, *Max*," cried Helen, and springing up she flung her arms about his neck and hid her face on his shoulder.

Then she turned to the farmer, "I'll never forget it—never!" she cried, and then she put her hands on his shoulders and kissed his rough sunburned cheek.

The man turned away in embarrassed silence. He was all unused to such demonstrations and he didn't know what to say or do. Not that he disliked it—not that at all—only he didn't know quite how to receive it. There was actually a red flush on both his cheeks as, ignoring Helen altogether, he turned again to Max, saying as he kicked at the still wriggling body of the snake,—

"Shouldn't wonder if that feller'd been round here quite a while, but I ain't seen a rattler on this farm before in fifteen years. They don't often get down off the mountains."

"Are there many on the mountains?" the boy asked.

"I don't think so. Now an' then we hear of one bein' killed up there, but not very often. See

here!" he added, turning suddenly to Helen, " *You* better go in t' the house, an' don't you be lookin' for a rattler every time you come into this barn. There never was one in here before, an' ain't likely ever to be another."

But the girl's nerves had received a shock that she could not get over at once, and her cheeks did not that day regain their usual color. Max was none the worse for his sudden startled awakening, and the next morning he felt much more rested and ready for work.

CHAPTER IV.

AN APPLE-BEE.

It was nearly a week before Helen could summon courage to speak to her aunt about the school. It was not because she was at all afraid of Mrs. Ramsay that she dreaded to broach the subject to her, but because she wanted so very much to go—and to have Max go with her—and she was so afraid that John Ramsay would forbid their going. For a day or two after the snake episode he had been more genial and approachable with her and her brother, but gradually he had fallen back into his gruff, silent ways.

The girl was wiping the dinner dishes while her aunt washed them, one morning, when she began timidly,—

“Aunt Mary, are we—Max and I—to go to school this winter?”

“Go to school? why I haven’t once thought about school. Do you want to go, child?”

“Oh, yes, I can’t bear to stop school when I’m only just fifteen,” Helen answered quickly, “and Max wants to go as much as I do.”

“When does the school begin—do you know?”

"Yes, Sepha Dunlap told me. It begins next Monday." Helen watched her aunt's face anxiously as she spoke, and her eyes shone with satisfaction when Mrs. Ramsay answered slowly,—

"Well, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't go, if you want to," then seeing Helen's happy face she added hastily and sadly, "but don't set your heart on it, dear, because you know it will have to be just as your uncle says, and I don't know how he'll feel about it. I'll speak to him the first chance I get."

A day or two later she began again. "I had a talk with your uncle yesterday about the school and he says that you can go if you want to, but Max can't at present; not until the harvest work is all done. Maybe he can spare him then; but he thinks there's no need of a boy's spending his time in school when he's most a man grown. You see," she added, noting Helen's disappointed expression, "he never went to school himself after he was fourteen, and he thinks other boys can get along without schooling same's he has."

Max was deeply disappointed when his sister told him what Mrs. Ramsay had said; he answered quietly, however,—

"I'm sorry, but I've no right to find fault. I certainly couldn't expect to go to school if I were earning my living in the city, you know."

"Yes—but that would be so different," Helen exclaimed.

Max continued in hopeful tone, "And besides if I do my best to please Uncle John—as I shall of course—I think maybe he'll conclude to let me go through the winter months anyhow. I've always heard that farmers have plenty of leisure in the winter."

His sister looked at him with eyes full of loving pride as she thought, "How much better he is than I; and how grave and manly he has grown since Uncle Henry died!" but aloud she said dolefully, "Well, then, I suppose I shall have to go without you. It will be hard and lonesome, Max—in a strange school too."

"So it will, Nellie," he replied sympathetically, and I'm afraid you won't like such a country school very well. It won't be much like the dear old high-school at Springfield; but all the same I'm glad you can go this year, at least."

The Monday before the school was to open Helen, coming downstairs, found the weekly wash nearly done and her aunt just setting the breakfast on the table.

"Why, auntie," she cried, "you must have been up for hours! Why didn't you call me early, so I could help you?"

"I didn't want you to get up so early," her aunt answered, with the quick smile that came so readily to her lips when she spoke to the girl.

"But you don't usually get at the wash before

breakfast," Helen replied. "Is there any extra work to be done to-day?"

"Yes. I didn't know till last night, but we're to have our apple-bee Wednesday, and I want to-morrow free for the cooking."

"An apple-bee—what is that, auntie?" Helen inquired in a puzzled tone.

"Why, the way folks do round here, is to all get together and pick the apples first on one farm and then another until all are gathered. This is a great apple country, you know, and most of the farmer have big orchards, and ship their apples to New York or Boston."

"Oh, that's the way, is it? Well, I think it's a nice neighborly fashion to help each other pick so; and I suppose they'll be here all day, and you have to get a nice dinner for them?" the girl inquired.

"Yes, and our barn's so big and clean that I thought I'd set the tables there this time."

"Oh, that will be fine, I shall love to help you auntie," Helen exclaimed, "I think it will be great fun."

"It means a sight of work though," answered the farmer's wife with a sigh. "I'm afraid before to-morrow night, you'll be ready to wish that there was no such thing as an apple-bee."

"At any rate I can save you some little of the work, Aunt Mary," the girl replied.

Before Tuesday night her aunt's prophecy had come true, for both of them had been steadily at

work during the whole of the two days. The wash was on the line before nine o'clock on Monday morning. It dried quickly in the wide sunny space, and as soon as it was dry, was taken in, sprinkled, and "folded down." Then when the dinner work was done the irons were hot, and Mrs. Ramsay and Helen stood at their ironing tables until every piece was finished and hung on the clothes frame to air. Then it was time to get supper, and when supper dishes were washed and put away, Helen—unused to such hard work—was ready to go straight to bed, and did.

The next day's labor was quite as hard, though of a different character. Helen seeded raisins, chopped meat and apples and suet, beat eggs and creamed butter from morning until well on towards night, while her aunt baked and boiled, made pies and cakes and cookies and doughnuts and bread—enough for a regiment—the girl thought, as she gazed at the loaded pantry shelves when all was done.

"They all look ever so nice, auntie," she said, "but I should think you'd be thankful that you have only one apple-bee a year."

"Indeed I am," the little woman answered, "but you've saved me so many steps this time! Always before I've had to do everything myself."

"You see you have a daughter to help you now," the girl returned, with a little caressing touch that brought a smile to her aunt's eyes.

On Wednesday morning, breakfast was despatched even earlier than usual, and soon after eight o'clock wagons of various sorts began to drive in at the open gate, each one bringing two or more, mostly young people, who all went trooping down to the great apple orchard calling out laughing challenges to each other as they went.

In the orchard, the farmer had collected a great store of baskets and barrels, and a couple of ladders, with long hooked sticks for pulling down the branches. He gave bluff, cordial welcome to each new arrival, but wasted no time in greetings. Like a wise general, he quickly marshaled his forces into line, and set each promptly to work. Some he sent to the step-ladders and some to climb the trees and carefully pick one by one the choicest fruit—that which would bring the highest price in the city market. Under other trees old comforts were spread, and young men were sent up to shake the trees while the girls gathered the fallen apples and filled barrel after barrel with them.

While the work went steadily forward the air rang with merry laughter and gay shouts. The young farmers among the boughs found time to slyly pelt the girls with apples now and then, and the girls were kept on the alert dodging these missiles as they filled their baskets with the fruit.

Max was in the midst of the merry, busy crowd

watching everything with eyes full of interest, and flashing back such apt retorts to the jests flung at him now and then, that he was speedily recognized as "a bright one, now, I tell you!" and soon found himself on a friendly footing with nearly all of the company.

Even John Ramsay himself lost much of his grim, harsh manner amid this crowd of frolicking workers, and laughed and joked with them in a fashion that made Max look at him in great surprise.

But the boy noticed that Tim Barney's attempts at friendly familiarity were but coldly received, especially by the girls, who would have little to say to him, and he rightly concluded that Tim was not a favorite in the neighborhood. Tim was well aware that this was so, and he did not fail to notice how differently Max was treated, and to resent it as an affront to himself. The dislike that he had felt for the boy from the first grew stronger now as he brooded over the matter, casting dark sullen glances at the lad's bright face.

At twelve o'clock a long blast on the horn made a transformation scene in the orchard. Down from trees and ladders the pickers tumbled, while the girls hastily emptied their baskets, and all began to move towards the barn.

On a long bench outside the barn were basins, pails of water, and towels, where faces and hands could be washed in preparation for dinner.

The barn floor had been swept that morning, and now three long tables stood there, covered with white cloths and loaded with tempting dishes. Two or three of the girls—among them Sepha Dunlap—volunteered to help the farmer's wife and Helen wait on the tables, and Max constituted himself a "runner" to bring additional supplies, or anything that might be wanted from the house.

Helen was too busy to notice how many curious glances followed her. As strangers, she and Max were objects of special interest to the younger portion of the company; but a shy smile and a brief word or two were her only response to the attempts to draw her into conversation. This was such a different company from any to which she had been accustomed, and their manners with each other were so free and easy, that Helen felt inclined to shrink into herself. She liked to watch the merry crowd and listen to their gay sallies, but she preferred to remain a little outside of it all. She did not notice that Sepha Dunlap watched her with admiring eyes and kept as close to her as possible through all the dinner hour. She felt sorry for Sepha, for, though she was not barefooted to-day, her shoes were worn and ragged, and no other girl among them was so shabbily dressed as she. Besides, Sepha was not rough and noisy like many of the girls, and Helen turned to her now and then with a little familiar

friendly word that made the girl's heart glow with delight.

When the meal was over, Sepha begged to be allowed to help clear the tables and wash the dishes and showed herself a most deft-handed little housemaid.

When the last dish was washed and put away, Mrs. Ramsay dropped wearily into a rocking chair, saying,—

“That's one good job over! Sepha, you've been real nice help. Now, Helen, if you ain't too tired maybe you'd like to go down to the orchard again with Sepha—but mind, I don't want either of you to pick up apples. You've done work enough, both of you, and there's the supper to be got and cleared away yet.”

“I'll stay and help about the supper if you'll let me,” Sepha cried eagerly. “I'd *like* to, Mrs. Ramsay.”

The farmer's wife cast a look of motherly compassion upon the girl as she replied, “You can stay if you want to, child.”

A quick gleam of satisfaction brightened Sepha's eyes as she nodded to Mrs. Ramsay, then turned to await Helen's decision. “Want to go to the orchard?” she asked.

“Yes—for a little while. We can sit down on the grass and watch them all,” Helen replied.

When the two girls reached the orchard, they found the work nearly done. All the trees had

been stripped and the best of the fruit barreled, but there was still a great deal to be gathered up off the ground.

Max had just driven down with old Pete, and many hands were busily loading the big wagon with the barrels of choice fruit. It was the first time that the farmer had allowed Max to harness or drive one of the horses, and the boy was pleased and proud, because he felt that his uncle was beginning to trust him.

Helen and Sepha sat down not far away, the former watching her brother and rejoicing to see him looking so bright and happy.

"Now drive careful, Max. Them apples mustn't get any bruises," was the farmer's caution, as, the wagon being loaded, Max took the reins to drive up to the barn.

Helen followed him for a moment with her eyes, then turned to watch a merry group near her.

The next moment Sepha sprang up and cried out excitedly, "Oh! Oh!!"

There was an angry shout from the farmer, and Helen turned hastily to see the wagon tilted over on one side, and the apples, those choice, "gilt-edged" apples, pouring out on the ground from half the barrels.

"Ye careless fool!" shouted the farmer in a towering rage, as he rushed over to the wagon and seized the horse by the bit. "Hain't ye any sense at all? Didn't I tell ye to drive careful?"

The boy's face was crimson with shame and mortification. For an instant he was silent, holding down with all his might the hot words that trembled on his tongue; but he did hold them down, and when he spoke, though his voice trembled a little, he spoke quietly.

"I don't think it was my fault, Uncle John. I was driving just as carefully as I could."

"Carefully!" repeated the farmer angrily, "can it careful to turn a wagon over like that an' dump out half the load? A five-year-old country boy could drive better'n that—or a girl either! Here you!" he added, as his eyes fell on Sepha's eager face, "you get up here an' show this city boy how to drive a team."

But Sepha stepped forward and drawing herself up to her full height, and clasping her hands behind her, looked straight into the farmer's angry face as she answered in clear distinct tones,—

"I will not. It wasn't the boy's fault."

"What?" roared the farmer—his anger rising to a white heat at being thus publicly defied by a slip of a girl like that—"you tell me you *won't* do as I say?"

"I tell you I won't," repeated the girl with all the calmness of dauntless courage—but her eyes were glowing like coals and her cheeks were white.

By this time all in the orchard had gathered about the wagon. Some of the young men were

picking up the apples and replacing them in the barrels, but most were watching to see what would follow. Max had sprung off the wagon-seat and stood gazing eagerly at Sepha, hoping that she would repeat the words she had spoken, "It wasn't the boy's fault." Helen had stepped across to her brother's side and with cheeks flushed with excitement and eyes shining with deep feeling, she too watched the slender girl as she stood with her flashing eyes lifted to the angry face above her.

As Sepha repeated her defiant words, the farmer raised his hand as if he would strike down the dauntless little figure, but before any one could interfere, he dropped it again, and, turning his back on the girl, gruffly ordered Tim to drive the wagon to the barn.

But again Sepha's clear voice cut through the silence of the watching throng, as she hastily stepped around and again faced the farmer.

"I say—it wasn't that boy's fault," she repeated. "Tim Barney made that wagon tip over. I saw him do it."

Then the farmer turned to Max. "Is that so?" he asked.

Max shut his lips firmly and glanced at Tim, who, as Sepha spoke, had stooped hastily and was now diligently tumbling some loose apples into a basket.

John Ramsay took two long steps and seized

the crouching man by the collar and pulled him to a standing posture. The man's face was flushed with confusion and his shifty, reddish eyes wandered everywhere but to the stern face above him. The farmer kept his grasp on Tim's collar as he shouted,

"Is that true? Did you tip that wagon over?"

"How could I? I wasn't a drivin' of it," was the sulky reply.

The farmer glanced over his shoulder and beckoned Sepha nearer.

"What did you see him do? Tell it out!" he exclaimed.

"He jumped up suddenly just as the horse was passing him and flirted that red handkerchief right in Pete's eyes," the girl answered, pointing to a red calico handkerchief hanging from the man's pocket, "and that scared the horse and made him jump to one side."

"What did you do it for—you hound?" shouted the farmer furiously.

Then Tim, finding himself cornered, turned at bay like any other cowardly beast.

"I did it 'cause I wanted to, if ye must know!" he cried, glaring up into the face above him. "You think that boy's about right—don't ye? Jest you wait an' see how he turns out. You'll find out what he is 'fore you're done with him, now you mark my words. You'll find out!"

He pointed one long, freckled finger at the boy,

gave a low, taunting laugh and walked deliberately off towards the barn without another word.

The group in the orchard looked into each other's faces with long breaths of relief after the sudden tense excitement of the past few minutes. They glanced doubtfully—some of them—at Max and Helen, but others did not hesitate to express their opinion of Tim Barney.

“He's a mean lot—that Barney.”

“Ramsay better get rid of him. He's no good.”

“He's taken a spite against the boy an' he'll try to do him a mischief.”

So they spoke to one another as they resumed their interrupted work.

As Tim turned away the farmer cast after him a threatening glance, then he said to Max, “Here—get up here and drive up to the barn,” and with a pleased look, the boy took the reins and drove carefully off with his load.

As he approached the barn he wondered if Tim would be there, and if he would interfere again with him. Tim was there but he was—or appeared to be—busy in the harness-room, and did not look up or speak to the boy.

The farmer had forgotten that Max would need some help in unloading the heavy barrels from the wagon, and so had sent no one with him. The boy would not ask Tim's help so, after considering for a moment, he brought from the basement a heavy board which he laid from the wagon-bed

to the barn floor, and with that he managed to slide and pull the barrels down without spilling a single apple. But when he brought up the next load, he asked one of the young men to drive up with him. So back and forth from the barn to the orchard the boy drove until all the fruit was stored.

By the time this was done the young people had quite recovered from the effects of the unpleasant episode in the orchard, and were as full of fun and gay nonsense as ever, but John Ramsay was still grave and stern. When all was done, he thanked his neighbors for their assistance and promised to be on hand next day to lend his aid in return at the next farm—but he was no longer genial and cheery as he had been in the morning.

Sepha lingered with Helen until the last apple was gathered and the last wagon had driven out of the yard, then she said briefly,—

“I’m going now. Good night.”

“But I thought you were going to stay and help about supper,” Helen answered quickly.

Sepha looked back longingly over her shoulder.

“I’d like to—ever so much,” she replied, “but Mr. Ramsay wouldn’t want to see me ’round to-night, I guess. Good-by,” and she ran off hastily as if afraid to trust her resolution.

Helen looked after her for a moment, then turned to wait for her brother who was just coming from the barn.

"That's a queer girl, but I like her. She's plucky," Max said.

"Yes, she wasn't the least bit afraid of Uncle John or Tim either—was she? But, Max, shouldn't you think that Uncle John would discharge Tim?"

"No," replied Max, "I heard some of the men in the orchard talking about it. They say it's awfully hard to get help around here, and if Uncle John should discharge Tim he wouldn't be able to get anybody else in his place, so he'd have to keep him until the fall work—the harvest work—is all done, and Tim knows it. That's why he dared to face Uncle John as he did."

"Wouldn't you have told what Tim did if Sepha hadn't, Max?"

"No, of course not," he answered in a matter-of-course tone. "Think I'd be a tell-tale to save myself?"

"Boys certainly are queer!" Helen thought to herself. Then aloud she said thoughtfully, "Tim will hate you after this, won't he?"

"Expect he will," her brother returned cheerfully, apparently in no wise dismayed at the prospect.

And Tim—as he milked the six cows in the barn—was brooding over the occurrences of the day, scowling savagely as he recalled the rebuffs he had received from one and another, and the outcome of his attempt to get Max into trouble, and then laughing softly as he thought how boldly

he had at last faced John Ramsay before them all.

“They can’t say I was afraid of the old man, anyhow,” he muttered, “an’ as to that Dale boy—I ain’t done with him yet!”

And in the mind of John Ramsay lingered those words that Tim had flung back over his shoulder with such evil emphasis,—

“You’ll find out what he is ’fore you’re done with him. You mark my words—you’ll find out”—lingered and rankled and made him harder and harsher to the boy in the days that followed.

CHAPTER V.

BEGINNING SCHOOL.

GREAT as had been her desire to attend school, Helen set off that first Monday with inward reluctance, which however, no one but Max suspected. He knew her so well that he understood how she shrank from going alone where all were strangers.

"Good luck to you, little girl!" he called after her from the barn door. She looked back and shook her head silently, as she turned down the road.

"I'll stop for Sepha," she said to herself. "It will be better than going alone."

The low rambling white house that looked so attractive from her window, lost much of its charm on a nearer view. There was an uncared-for appearance about the porch and the entrance that Helen could not help noticing, as she knocked on the door.

She heard slow shuffling steps, and then a woman opened the door, a woman that she was sure must be Sarah Barnes. She was large and fair, with a loose and dropping-to-pieces effect

about her hair and her clothing, as she stood gazing at Helen with a sort of mild curiosity, waiting for her to make known her business.

"Is—Sepha at home?" the girl inquired hesitatingly.

"E—us," the woman answered, still leaning against the half-shut door.

"Is she going to school this morning?" Helen continued.

"Eus, I guess so. Sepha—be you goin' to school?"

The woman raised her voice as she asked the question, still lounging against the door and looking at the girl before her.

Instantly there followed the sound of swift footsteps through the entry, and the next moment the woman and the door were pushed uncereemoniously aside, and Sepha stood there looking with shining eyes into Helen's face.

"I'll come in just a minute—as soon as I get Patty's things on," she exclaimed. "Will you come in?"

"No, thank you—I'll wait out here, this time," Helen answered.

Sepha disappeared, and Sarah Barnes remained in the doorway, asking a vague question now and then, until Sepha came out again with her sister.

"So this is Patty," Helen said, smiling down at the little one. Then over the child's head she whispered to Sepha, "Isn't she a dear!"

If Helen had not already won Sepha's warmest admiration and regard, that remark would have gone far towards winning them, for Sepha lavished upon her little sister a deep devotion that was more like a mother's love than a sister's. She was utterly unselfish where Patty was concerned; but the child had a singularly sweet, gentle disposition, which all her sister's devotion had not as yet spoiled. She had a pretty flower-like face, with a clear pink and white complexion, dark blue eyes and a real little rosebud of a mouth. She was perfectly happy when with her sister and obeyed her unhesitatingly always. Helen noticed that she was plainly dressed, but in much better fashion than Sepha herself.

The three walked on together, Patty skipping happily along with her hand in her sister's.

The schoolhouse was about a mile from the Dunlap farm. It was a small, unpainted building, as plain as it could possibly be, and as unattractive.

When the girls approached it, they found half a dozen boys perched on a stone wall opposite. They were laughing and frolicking with each other, but as the girls appeared a sudden silence fell upon the group on the wall, and all eyes watched the stranger curiously. Sepha paid not the slightest attention to them. She walked along with her free, independent step, and led the way into the schoolhouse. Quite a number of

girls were there, but they were all small ones who had taken possession of the front seats, where Patty at once joined them. The teacher had not yet arrived.

Inside the door Helen stopped short and looked about her. The outside appearance of the place had not led her to expect anything very attractive within, but the reality far exceeded her expectations in the way of dreariness. The plastered walls were dark with the smoke and grime of years. The desk and benches were hacked and cut with all the letters of the alphabet and all sorts of rude sketches and hieroglyphs besides; and walls and floor and desks and seats were splotted and stained with ink.

"I should think an ink fountain had been playing here," Helen said to Sepha. "I never—*saw* such a place! Don't they *ever* clean it, Sepha?"

"They sweep the floor," replied Sepha in a *serious* tone, as she glanced first at Helen's face and then slowly about the room, seeing everything through this other girl's eyes.

She saw windows dim with fly-specks and cobwebs; a big air-tight stove red with rust; a water-pail and a tin dipper lying in one corner and a heap of ragged books in another; and over everything a thick coating of dust. She saw it all as if it were for the first time, and she *exclaimed earnestly*,—

"It *is* horrid, isn't it, Helen? I wonder why I never noticed it so before."

Helen made no reply. She felt heart-sick. and home-sick. Mechanically she followed her companion to a seat near the back of the room.

"Wait!" cried Sepha. She stooped and pulled an old sponge from the desk and began to wipe the dust from the seat.

"There!" she said, "that's a little better. I don't wonder you don't want to sit down in it," she added, her quick eyes noting the disgusted expression on the face of the other girl. "I'm 'most sure," She continued slowly, "that 'twill be cleaned—some—before to-morrow."

As she spoke a group of large girls came in with much noisy talk and laughter. They all eyed the stranger curiously as they selected their seats, and having thrown their books and slates down on their desks, one of them walked over to Helen, while the others stood or sat about and looked after her.

This girl was tall and striking in appearance, with big black eyes and hair, and a bright color.

"You're Mrs. Ramsay's girl, ain't you?" she began, perching familiarly on the side of Helen's desk.

Helen answered quietly, "Mrs. Ramsay is my aunt."

"Your name isn't Ramsay, is it?"

"No, it is Helen Dale."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"'Spose you've always been to a city school before?"

"Yes," Helen replied a little coldly, not quite relishing this public cross-examination.

"Humph! Guess you don't think much of our school, then."

Helen cast another quick glance around.

"I think—it wouldn't hurt it to have a good cleaning," she answered composedly.

The girl drew herself up in an offended fashion.

"We're not clean enough for city folks, girls," she called across to the group she had left, and then she got off the desk and walked back to her friends and they all discussed the stranger in half-audible whispers for several minutes.

Helen's face flushed a little but she said nothing. Sepha, however, glared angrily at the group, which seemed to amuse the girls immensely. Helen learned afterwards, that "picking at" Sepha Dunlap to "make her flare up" was a favorite amusement of some of the ruder great girls.

The entrance of the new teacher was the signal for a sudden silence, all eyes watching him as he took his seat on the platform before the old desk that looked about as battered and defaced as those of the pupils. Helen looked at him with the keenest interest. If he should prove to be a good teacher she felt that she might be able to

endure all that was unpleasant in the school—but if not, then she made up her mind that she would not come; she would study at home evenings with Max. So she studied the teacher with eager interest. She saw a young man of not more than twenty-three, well-dressed and gentlemanly in appearance, with nothing noticeable about him except a pair of very keen quick eyes that seemed to be everywhere at once. His manner was very quiet and his voice rather low, yet it could be distinctly heard all over the room.

The boys who had been ornamenting the top of the stone wall came tramping in, and other boys and girls straggled in after them. There were perhaps thirty in the room when the master, glancing at his watch, rose and looked in leisurely fashion about upon them all. After a few quiet words of greeting he opened the school in the usual manner, and then said,—

“I will give you older ones some written work to do, and then arrange the classes according to the results of that work.”

A low groan came from some of the boys, but the master paid no attention to it. He gave out several problems in arithmetic, and while the older pupils were laboring over these, he turned his attention to the younger ones.

Sepha was among the first to complete the work, but the problems were simple ones and Helen also solved ~~them~~ without difficulty. Then

she looked about her. She saw sly interchanges of question and answer among some of the girls and boys, but many of them did the work honestly, as best they could.

A written exercise in geography followed, and this kept most busy until the noon intermission. Then there was a hasty scramble for lunch-pails and baskets and a gathering in groups to dispose of their contents, and to discuss the new teacher and the questions he had given.

Sepha darted in among the little ones and drew Patty out from the others; then taking her dinner-pail she said to Helen,—

“I don’t want to stay here with all these, do you?”

“No, I’d rather not,” Helen replied.

“Come on then. I know a nice place a little way off.”

She hurried across the road, slipped under a pair of bars, dragging Patty after her, and Helen followed to a rocky ledge cropping out from the hillside, where a clump of pines screened them from the view of the scholars below.

“It’s nice up here—I like it,” Helen said contentedly, as she dropped down on the rock and opened her basket. “We can have a cozy lunch all to ourselves here, can’t we, Patty?”

“Yes,” replied Patty happily, her eyes resting hungrily on a fat, juicy little turnover that Helen had just laid on a napkin spread on the rock.

But Sepha promptly turned her back on Helen and her tempting luncheon, and pulled her little sister over to the other side of the rock.

"No," she said gruffly, "we'll eat our lunch alone. Come along, Patty!"

Patty followed without protest, except the silent protest of a longing backward glance over her shoulder.

"Oh, Sepha," cried Helen, "don't do so! What makes you?"

Sepha made no response, but sitting down a little way off and keeping her back to Helen slowly opened her dinner-pail.

"Sepha—please come back. I'm lonesome here all alone," pleaded Helen.

Sepha shook her head and handed something to Patty.

"Well, then, I won't eat one single mouthful," exclaimed Helen, with a little touch of indignation in her voice.

At that Sepha glanced around and saw that she was putting the food back into her basket.

"Oh no, Helen, you mustn't! Please don't!" she protested hastily.

But Helen shut the cover and sat looking off with a very sober face. "I don't care to eat alone," she said coldly.

For a moment Sepha sat silent and motionless, then she sprang up, snatched up her pail and marched back to Helen.

"There!" she exclaimed passionately, holding the uncovered pail before the bewildered eyes of the other girl. "Look at that mess, and see if you'd want to eat such a lunch as *that* with anybody else—or alone either," she added.

Involuntarily Helen's eyes noted it all—some thick chunks of heavy, slack-baked bread, two or three slices of boiled corned beef and two squares of soggy apple-pie—as unappetizing a collection as one could well imagine.

She jumped up and flung her arms hastily around the girl's neck, crying out in a penitent tone,—“Oh Sepha—I'm so *sorry*! I just thought you were vexed about something. I never thought of anything like that!”

Suddenly Sepha snatched up the bread and flung it as far as she could send it. The meat followed, and then the pie.

"There!" she cried again. "Let the crows eat it! That's all it's fit for. That's the kind of cooking Sarah Barnes gives us."

The next moment her eyes fell on little Patty's face lifted wonderingly to hers, the violet eyes swimming in tears. She dropped down on the rock and drew the child close, saying,—“There Patty—sister's gone and flung away your lunch too, hasn't she. I forgot all about you, dearie.”

But already Helen's basket was open again and she was filling the child's hands with a chicken sandwich and the fat little turnover.

"Don't you dare to say that she shall not eat them, Sepha Dunlap!" Helen cried. "You can starve yourself if you will, but you shall not let that child go hungry."

"I'm sorry, Helen—truly I am!" Sepha looked up with eyes as wet as Patty's as she spoke. "I don't often forget Patty, do I, little sister?"

Patty's little white teeth were already buried in the sandwich, and, for obvious reasons, she could not answer, but she shook her head and smiled contentedly as she glanced at her full hands.

"Now, Sepha, be sensible and good—do, and take some, please. Aunt Mary filled my basket and there is twice as much as I can possibly eat," Helen pleaded, holding out the basket.

But Sepha set her lips firmly and drew her hands behind her.

"I can't, Helen, truly I can't. It would choke me; besides I'm not hungry. I don't often eat lunch. You wouldn't if Sarah Barnes cooked for you," she added, gloomily.

"No, I'm sure I shouldn't!" was Helen's earnest reply. "But, Sepha, is all her cooking like that?"

"Yes. She can't cook any more than an old hen!" cried Sepha vehemently.

"Then—why don't you learn to do it yourself?" questioned Helen hesitatingly. She was never sure how Sepha would take a remark or a query.

She took this one quietly enough. "'Cause she won't let me. Says she 'can't be bothered with young ones messin' round in her kitchen.' Besides—I couldn't do any better, with nobody to show me how."

"Sepha—I'm sure Aunt Mary would show you or tell you anything you want to know, and she's such a nice cook! See how white and light these biscuits are." She held one out. "Just try it," she added, artfully.

But Sepha was not to be cajoled in any such fashion. She shook her head and turned her eyes resolutely away.

"I'm not hungry," she repeated, "and—I don't believe your aunt would want to be bothered showing me how to cook."

"I'm sure she would. I'm going to ask her anyhow," Helen protested.

When Patty was forced reluctantly to declare that she could not possibly eat any more, Helen closed her basket and then she and Sepha sat on the rock and talked until the bell summoned them back to the schoolroom.

The afternoon session seemed to Helen intolerably tedious and wearisome. The little ones were so restless—no wonder on such hard high benches—and the older ones so noisy with their heavy shoes scuffling on the bare floor, and their wooden-framed slates clattering on the desks, that she grew very weary long before school was dismissed.

The room was close, too, and when the master opened two of the windows some of the girls shivered and declared that they were cold, and the windows had to be closed again. Helen's cheeks were flushed and her head aching severely when school was over.

"Sepha," she exclaimed as they walked homeward, "if it wasn't for you, I'd never go into that school-house again."

Sepha glanced up with a pleased smile, but before she could answer a girl passed them. She gave Helen a peculiar look as she went by, but she did not speak.

"Walk slowly till she gets out of hearing," whispered Sepha, and then she was silent until the girl had gone on ahead.

"Who is she?" Helen inquired.

"She's Lizzie Pidge, and she's one of the worst girls in the school, I think. She's always slipping round softly and appearing suddenly right close to you as she did just now; and that way she overhears lots of things, and then goes and repeats them. She makes more mischief than girls that do things that she would never think of doing."

"I suppose she heard what I said, but I don't know that I care," Helen answered.

"I'm sure she did, and I'm sorry, because she's certain to repeat it so that it will seem to mean something different from what you meant by it."

"Oh, well, I'm not going to worry over that," returned Helen carelessly.

When they reached the Dunlap house, a tall rough-looking boy was driving a team into the barnyard.

"That's my brother," Sepha said, and as she looked at his hard, selfish face, Helen thought of her own brother and was more than ever sorry for Sepha.

When she reached home, she answered her aunt's questions about the school and the new teacher, but she said nothing about her own impressions of it all. Indeed, she was not thinking much about the school just then.

"Aunt Mary, is Mr. Dunlap a poor man?" she inquired.

"Poor? No indeed. He owns one of the best farms in this county and he knows how to manage it too. He's a forehanded man—George Dunlap is."

"Then why does he let Sepha go looking so—and have such a housekeeper as Sarah Barnes?"

"The reason is, that he's too fond of money. He's as tight as the bark to a tree. It's like pul-lin' eye teeth to get a dollar out of him, even when he acknowledges that he owes it. While his wife lived, it wasn't quite so bad. He thought everything of her, an' she could coax out of him money enough to get what was really needed. She used to dress Sepha real pretty when she was a little girl, for she was quick an' tasty an' could make

a little go a long way, in dress ; but when she died, it seemed as if George Dunlap shut up his heart and his pockets once for all. It certainly is scandalous the way that child goes looking, an' she's a good girl too—Sepha Dunlap is."

"But why doesn't he have a better housekeeper?" Helen questioned, and then she told her aunt about Sepha's lunch.

"The poor child—just think of that!" Mrs. Ramsay exclaimed. "And she wouldn't eat a mite of your lunch?"

"Not a single mouthful."

Mrs. Ramsay sighed. "The proud little tyke!" she said. "But after all I can't help admirin' her pride, even if 'tain't quite the proper thing. But as to Sarah Barnes—you see it's more than hard to get a good housekeeper around here, and she went there right after Mrs. Dunlap died, and she's been there ever since, and I guess is likely to stay till Sepha gets big enough to do all the work herself. She's kind of shif'less, Sarah is, but she's easy an' good-tempered, an' I s'pose George Dunlap thinks he ain't likely to get any better help, an' I don't know as he is, either."

Then Helen brought forward her plan. "Auntie, I want to learn to cook, and I was wondering if you'd mind if Sepha should come here Saturday mornings and learn to make pies and cake and bread when you are teaching me, as you said you would."

“Why land sakes, of course she can come an’ welcome—why not?” Mrs. Ramsay answered heartily. “But she’s a wild, shy little thing. I shouldn’t wonder if you’d have hard work to coax her to come.”

“Well, I’ll try it, anyhow,” the girl replied in a tone of satisfaction.

While this conversation was going on, Sepha with a kettle of hot water in one hand and a pail of soft soap and scrubbing-brush in the other, was trudging back over the road to the schoolhouse.

She found the place deserted, but the door was not locked—it seldom was—and she went in and set diligently to work. Her arms were slender, but they were strong and wiry, and she spared neither soap nor muscle. She scrubbed Helen’s desk, inside and out, and her seat, until both were as clean as her hands could make them. Then she scrubbed her own seat and desk, and Patty’s. She was tired enough when all this was done, but she looked longingly at the floor.

“I do wish I could scrub it under Helen’s seat anyhow,” she said to herself. “But I’ve used up all my hot water, so I’ll have to leave it this time. I guess Helen will be surprised, though.” Her eyes lighted vividly at the thought, “and I do hope she’ll be pleased, and be willing to keep on coming. I don’t know what I should do now, if she should leave.”

Then she gathered up her pails and brush and

cloths and walked slowly home, her thoughts so full of her new friend that she did not give a thought to her aching back and her weary feet. But she did not guess the results that were to follow from what she had done.

CHAPTER VI.

A SCRUBBING--SOCIAL.

SEPHA and her little sister were waiting at the corner when Helen came down the road the next morning. It was early and Helen walked slowly, for this morning she was more than half inclined to go back home and never again enter the dreary, unattractive schoolroom.

But Sepha met her with eager impatience.

"Do hurry up!" she cried. "We've been waiting for you ever so long."

Something in her face and voice awakened Helen's interest, and she forgot for the moment her half-formed intention of turning back, and quickened her steps to keep pace with the other's.

"What's your hurry? It's early—we've plenty of time," she answered wonderingly.

For Sepha was swinging along at such a pace that Patty had to take a little skipping step every now and then to keep up.

"But I *want* to get there early this morning," she said, and as she looked at Helen her face was full of her hidden delight in the surprise in store for her friend.

"I'd more than half a mind not to go to school this morning," Helen remarked slowly.

"Oh!" cried Sepha, in a tone of dismay, "you're not going to leave?"

Helen laughed a little. "I've hardly begun enough to leave," she repeated, "but truly, Sepha, I don't want to go one bit."

"If you don't—I won't!" exclaimed Sepha, but at that Patty cried out dolefully, "Oh, sister, you must go with me."

"So I must. Yes, Patty, I will," she added hastily, seeing the look of distress in the child's face.

Then she turned again to Helen. "*Please* don't make up your mind yet. Try it a little while first," she pleaded, "I'm most sure Mr. Keith is a good teacher, and I—I guess it will be nicer to-day, anyhow."

"Why, what do you mean?" Helen questioned, but Sepha answered only,—

"Just you wait and see!"

A faint curiosity stirred in Helen, and because she was wholly undecided about the school, she continued to walk on towards it. There were no big boys sitting on the stone wall when the girls reach the place this morning, only far up the road a group of small figures had just appeared in sight as Sepha pushed open the schoolhouse door and hurried up to her seat.

"Ugh! How stuffy it is in here! Let's open

the windows and get in some fresh air," Helen exclaimed, and she hastily pushed up two of the windows, securing them from slipping down by turning the wooden buttons with their notched edges.

"Such a funny way of fastening windows," she laughed. "Aunt Mary's windows have buttons just like these."

She crossed slowly over to where Sepha was still standing beside her seat, then, as she laid down her books, she noticed the clean-scrubbed desks. "Why! Somebody's been cleaning—" she began, "but only just our two desks. How funny! Who do you suppose—" Then looking into her companion's face and seeing the light in her shining eyes, she understood. "Sepha Dunlap—you cleaned these desks!" she cried. "You must have come back here yesterday after school to do it."

Sepha nodded. "Didn't I tell you it would be nicer here to-day? And it is, isn't it! Now it won't seem quite so horrid to you here—will it, Helen?" she asked wistfully.

Helen could not repress a shiver as her eyes wandered to the neighboring desks and the floor, but she answered heartily, "Sepha, it was lovely of you to take such pains just to please me. I'll come to school for a while anyhow," she added hastily, as if afraid to trust her resolution unless she bound herself by a promise. She was rewarded

by the gleam of joy that for an instant irradiated Sepha's face.

Helen was beginning to feel the charm of that little plain, freckled face—the charm of its constantly changing expression. She said to herself now, “Her face is lovely when she looks like that, but it is never twice alike.”

The group that had been in sight far up the road now came clattering noisily in and soon some of the older girls followed.

Helen was arranging her books in her clean desk when they entered, and she did not look up until the high-pitched voice of Julia Perkins exclaimed,

“Well, I declare, girls, did you ever! Look at their desks, will you? I told you yesterday we were not clean enough for city folks.”

Julia was the black-eyed girl who had perched on Helen's desk and questioned her the day before. Her face now was flushed and her eyes full of anger as she stood in the aisle and pointed a scornful finger at the two desks that were such a marked contrast to the others.

Sepha started hastily to her feet, her eyes and cheeks flaming, as, stamping her foot angrily she cried out, “You can just mind your own affairs, Julia Perkins. *I* washed these desks, and I had just as much right to do it as you have to let yours go dirty—so there now! And you needn't to blame Helen for it, for she had nothing to do with

it, and didn't know anything about it until she came here this morning."

"Oh!" retorted Julia with a taunting emphasis, "So it's Miss Josepha Dunlap that is so extraordinarily neat and particular all of a sudden. I never should have guessed it to look at her—would you, girls?" and she gave a shrill, mirthless laugh as she flashed a glance at Sepha's shabby dress and much-worn shoes.

Sepha's face was burning now, but before she could answer, Helen's arm was about her and Helen's indignant voice made swift reply,—

"That was cruel of you, Julia Perkins—cruel to taunt a girl with what she cannot help and is not to blame for!" she cried indignantly, and then she whispered softly in Sepha's ear, "Don't think of it, dear; it isn't worth minding."

Now the teacher had discovered a short way "cross-lots" from his boarding-place to the school-house, and it chanced that, following this path, he was passing the open window just in time to hear Julia's first remark. Involuntarily he paused and glanced into the room, and so heard the swift interchange of hot words that followed.

Passing quickly along to the door he entered the room, and at his appearance there was a sudden change in the attitudes and expressions of the girls. Julia Perkins, who was very desirous to stand well with the new teacher, smoothed down her ruffled feathers and subsided into her

own seat, while Helen resumed the arrangement of her possessions in her desk. Sepha's face was hidden as she bent over an open book, and only Helen saw that the book was upside down.

All through the morning session, Mr. Keith's thoughts kept returning to that scene of which he had been an unseen spectator, and he pondered earnestly over the matter, trying to decide how to turn it to advantage for the school. He noticed that, at the noon intermission, Helen and Sepha were not with the other girls, and guessed that they were unpopular in the school. He had taken special note of these two on the previous day. Sepha's quickness, and the intense though controlled vitality about her, had not failed to attract his attention; and Helen's dainty refinement of appearance and manner made her very noticeable among the other girls. Mr. Keith was not willing to have the school atmosphere made unpleasant for two such exceptional pupils, and moreover he was almost as much disturbed as Helen had been by the untidiness of the schoolroom; but being a newcomer he was obliged to feel his way carefully, not knowing how any suggestion of his might be received.

Just before the hour for dismissing the school, he called for attention, and said quietly,—

“You all know that a schoolhouse which has been closed for months must need something in the way of cleaning, and it has been my custom

to have what I call a cleaning-bee, where we all take hold and assist in the work, and when it is done, have a school social in the fresh, orderly room. I am very glad to see that a beginning has already been made." He glanced at the seats where Helen and Sepha sat, and every eye in the room was turned in the same direction, "And now I will leave it to you to decide whether we shall continue the work individually, or unite work and play as I have suggested."

He paused; the pupils looked doubtfully at each other, but no one ventured to break the silence.

"Will any one make a motion?" the teacher inquired, and Julia Perkins promptly responded,

"I move that we have a cleaning-bee, to be followed by a social as Mr. Keith has suggested."

The motion was promptly seconded, and when the vote was taken it was unanimous. Helen and Sepha did not vote at all.

Then, under the direction of Mr. Keith, two committees were appointed, one to have charge of the work, and the other of the social to follow.

The novelty of the plan made the girls and boys forget or overlook the hard work involved; besides, "many hands make labor light," as they had often written in their copybooks. Furthermore, almost any kind of labor can be turned into a frolic when a score or more of merry young

people combine to accomplish it, and in this quiet country neighborhood "socials" of one sort or another were about the only form of recreation or amusement; and the older girls and boys were but too glad of the opportunity to have one all their own—without the presence of older sisters and brothers who might throw them into the background. This would be all their own, and the games would be of their own choosing; so they flung themselves into the preparations with a will.

One of the oldest and quietest of the girls—Mary Bond—was elected chairman of the workers' committee, and Julia Perkins chairman of the social committee.

Mary knew how to work herself, as most farmer's daughters do, but she also knew how to make others work, and she quickly formed her plans and laid out her work for each. Mr. Keith agreed to close the school at noon on Friday. Then the cleaning was to begin at once, and it was thought that it could be completed in three hours, so that there would be ample time to go home for supper and rest before returning for the entertainment in the evening.

When school was dismissed, the girls and boys crowded about Mary and Julia asking questions and making suggestions. Even the little ones clamored for a chance to help. Only Helen and Sepha stood apart—Sepha proud and hurt because

she felt herself left out, and Helen feeling strange and lonely among them all, and uncertain what to do. When most of the others were gone and only two or three were left with Mary, Helen said, "Sepha, that Mary Bond has a pleasant manner—I've been watching her. Let's go over and offer to help."

But Sepha's mouth took on its set determined look.

"You can if you want to," she replied coldly. "I shan't beg them to let me scrub their dirty old floor."

"Please, Sepha," Helen pleaded, but the girl only gave her shoulders an impatient little shrug, and shook her head.

"Then I'll have to go alone," Helen continued.

"Don't, Helen! It would be a shame for you to do such work. Stop!" as Helen turned away, "Helen, stop! If you'll keep out of it, I'll go over to Mary and offer to scrub—anything—the stove if she says so!" Sepha exclaimed in a low vehement tone.

"As if I'd let you do any more such work to save me!" replied Helen with a look that melted Sepha's pride in an instant.

"Come along then," she said, and marched straight across to Mary, who broke off what she was saying, and looked doubtfully at her. In truth Sepha, with her shoulders thrown back and

her head proudly lifted and a somber gleam in her eyes, looked far from friendly.

But Helen had followed her, and she stepped quickly forward before Sepha could speak.

"Please—won't you let us help—Sepha and me?" she said gently. "We don't want to be left out."

Sepha longed to cry out stormily, "*I do!*" but Helen's soft touch on her arm restrained her.

Mary glanced uncertainly from one to the other, while the girls with her looked on in silence.

"Why—if you want to help, of course we shall be glad to have you," Mary began, turning to Helen, "but we didn't suppose, we thought—" she paused and colored a little, uncertain how to so word her thought as to avoid giving offense to Helen or arousing Sepha's quick temper.

"I hope you did not think that I have any desire to shirk my share of school duties, of any sort," Helen returned with a friendly smile. "As long as I am in this school, I want to be one among you—not one by myself—so please count me in, and give me—Sepha and me—a place in your scrubbing brigade," she ended laughingly.

Mary's face brightened. "Why, of course, we'll be glad to count you in," she answered cordially. "Let me see, what shall I give her to do, Sepha?" she added, a quick instinct guiding her.

Sepha had been standing like a statue, gazing off into vacancy, but at this appeal her eyes came back and she replied promptly, "Give her some easy part. *She* can't scrub!" Then as Helen hastily protested, Sepha added, "Well I don't care if you can—you're not going to! It would not be fair, Mary, for her to clean up our dirt."

"No I don't think it would," replied Mary cordially, "but I'll find some work for you both. There'll be plenty of it. But now it's awfully late and I must get home; my mother won't know what has become of me," and they all left the schoolroom together.

During the next two days quite as much time and thought were given to the discussion of Friday's work and play, as to the lessons, but Mr. Keith was wise enough to realize that his pupils were possibly learning better lessons than any in the text books, and he was very lenient.

On Friday morning he was early at the school, and standing in the doorway he laughed to himself as he watched the approach of his pupils. Not one was empty-handed. Some had brooms over their shoulders; some had brushes and dustpans; some pails and scrubbing-brushes; some soap and old cloths for cleaning; and one little girl had a pile of old newspapers that "mother thought would be the best thing to polish the window glass," she explained.

Lessons dragged that morning, and Mr. Keith

had to resort to various expedients to keep his classes interested in their work.

When the sunlight fell on the "noon-mark" on one of the windows, there was an impatient stir all over the room, and the teacher promptly dismissed the school. The pupils tumbled out pell-mell, and lunches were summarily disposed of.

A big tin boiler full of water had adorned the top of the stove all the morning. The water was emptied now into several pails, and the boiler re-filled. The empty lunch-pails and baskets were put away, and girls, and some of the boys as well, tied on big gingham aprons, and the work began.

Mary Bond proved herself an able general and managed her somewhat unruly forces with a skill that won the teacher's silent approbation.

The desks were first cleaned out, then the floors were swept and the walls and even the ceiling thoroughly brushed and dusted. Then, while one detachment washed the windows inside and out, another scrubbed the desks, the seats and the woodwork about the room. When all this was done the biggest and strongest of the girls and boys set to work on the floor. Mary did not spare herself; she wielded a scrubbing-brush with her strong arms as well as the best of her subordinates. Nor did one scrubbing content her.

"This job is going to be done thoroughly," she declared, "and a floor as dirty as this can't be thoroughly cleaned in once going over."

So three times in succession the floor was diligently scrubbed by three different scrubbing "squads" until even Mary was content.

Sepha had brought a scrubbing-brush, and waiting for no orders, she fell to work with the first lot, but Mary set Helen to polishing windows with the newspapers, and at that the girl worked as faithfully as any of the others.

Even the master joined the army of laborers, but as the girls would not allow him to do any of the cleaning, he sent for a saw and used it so effectually while the cleaning was going on, that, by the time the work was completed, he had such a goodly pile of wood to show for his labor that the boys' respect for him was much increased.

There was a deal of freely expressed satisfaction when at last even Mary Bond could suggest nothing more to be done for the improvement of the schoolroom, and the girls and boys gathered up their pails and brushes and set off homewards, rejoicing over the work accomplished and looking forward to the pleasures of the evening.

This time Helen and Sepha did not go off by themselves. They walked along among a crowd of others who went in the same direction, and Helen began to feel that she was in a friendly atmosphere. She laughed and chatted with those near her, but Sepha trudged on saying little to any one, with her small sister's hand, as usual, in hers. Now and then she cast a quick impatient

glance at Lizzie Pidge who had hovered around Helen all day. She had seemed very friendly and talkative, but remembering what Sepha had said of her, Helen had not responded very cordially to her advances. Now she came close to Helen on the other side and hooking her arm through that of the latter, said familiarly,—

“I’m coming to see you soon. Our house is only half a mile above Mr. Ramsay’s place.”

Helen answered pleasantly, trying, however, gently to disengage her arm, but Lizzie held on, disregarding entirely the scowling glances of Sepha who was on Helen’s other side.

“I’m so glad you’re coming to-night. Will your brother come too?” Lizzie continued.

“I don’t know. He will if I do,” Helen answered.

“*If* you do? Why of course you will. We’d feel dreadfully if you didn’t, wouldn’t we, girls? Say, girls,” raising her voice, in spite of Helen’s low protest, “wouldn’t we all feel dreadfully if Helen shouldn’t come to the social to-night after helping clean all the afternoon, too.”

“Why, you are coming, aren’t you?” Mary Bond asked quickly, turning back.

“I don’t know. I will if my brother can come with me,” Helen replied.

“Well, I hope he can,” Mary returned, and several others said something of the same sort.

“If he doesn’t we shall think you’ve told him

we're not nice," Lizzie added with a shrill laugh. "We all know how you felt about the school that first day."

Helen colored confusedly while Sepha flashed a provoked glance at Lizzie.

A silence fell on the group at Lizzie's words, and some of the girls cast at Helen glances which she felt lacked the friendliness of a little while before. But Mary Bond said quietly,—

"I don't wonder that Helen felt out of place in such a schoolroom as ours was. For my part I think we owe her a vote of thanks for being in a way, the means of opening our eyes to see it as it was. We'd got so used to it that we really never thought anything about it. Not one of us would have tolerated such dirt and disorder in our own homes," and she cast a friendly smile at Helen for which the girl thanked her in her heart as she answered hastily,—

"Nobody could ask for a more delightfully clean schoolroom than yours is now, and I, for one, am glad of the cleaning bee because it has helped me to get acquainted with you all."

The faces of the girls brightened at this, and as they left Helen and Sepha at the crossroads, they cordially hoped that she would join them in the evening.

Somewhat to her surprise her brother was quite willing to go with her to the school social.

"It will be a little break and change," he said,

"and I'd like to get better acquainted with some of those who were here at the apple-bee."

So they went off together after supper, the farmer making no objection and his wife wishing them a pleasant evening.

"Do you mind if we stop for Sepha, Max?" Helen asked as they reached the corner. "She said she wouldn't go, but maybe she will if we stop for her."

"All right—I don't mind," he replied.

But Sepha, though she looked at them wistfully and longingly—or at any rate Helen thought so—still refused to go, and Helen could not urge her because she guessed that the girl had nothing fit to wear, even to such a gathering as this.

"I'm ever so sorry, Sepha," she said as she turned away with her brother, leaving the slender figure standing in the doorway looking silently after them.

"I'm so sorry for her," Helen said softly, and Max answered,—

"It's a shame that there's nobody to look out for a little thing like her!"

The schoolhouse presented a very festive appearance as they approached it, for several of the girls had brought kerosene lamps and it was brilliantly illuminated. Helen shrank a little from entering, for they were evidently among the latest arrivals, not being used to prompt coun-

try hours, but the social committee—proud of its new honors as a committee—hastened to welcome them, and Mr. Keith came forward at once to meet them. Helen introduced her brother and Max liked the young teacher at once—a mutual liking indeed there seemed to be, for Helen noticed that the two were frequently together during the evening.

Ordinarily at such gatherings as this games more or less rough were the principal amusements, but on this occasion, Julia Perkins had consulted the teacher, and with his help a brief, bright program had been prepared. Mr. Keith had brought his violin, one of the boys had a banjo, and thanks to the winter singing-schools, most of the girls and many of the boys could sing. So they had music, and one of the girls read two or three selections, and one of the boys gave a recitation.

This would have been the end of the program had not Mary Bond had a sudden inspiration. As she sat looking at the fine, interested face of Max Dale, she leaned over and whispered to his sister,

“Doesn’t your brother recite or—or something? He looks as if he could.”

“He can whistle, beautifully,” Helen answered, and forthwith Max was asked to contribute his share to the entertainment of the company. He was not shy, and with a good-humored word or

two he stepped up on the platform and began to whistle. He could imitate the notes of any of the birds with which he was familiar, and his performance won much applause, but what gave most delight, at any rate to the smaller ones, was his rendering of a frog concert, and then an imitation of the hen-yard notes. Again and again the boys called for these until Max laughingly declined "until next time." But he had won a place for himself, and from that evening he was sure of a welcome wherever there were any boys who had been present at that social.

One result of this social was the formation of a glee club under the direction of Mr. Keith—a club which had a healthful influence on many, indeed on most, of its members; but by far the best result, to the teacher's mind, was the strengthening of the friendly and companionable spirit among the girls and boys as a school. Indeed a strong school loyalty had its birth in that day's labors and the recreation that followed.

There were many large boys present that evening—boys who had not attended the school during the week. One of these was Jack Dunlap. Helen noticed him more than once—feeling an interest in him because he was Sepha's brother, but though he looked like her, his face was totally different in expression. It had none of the vivid change and brightness that made hers so attractive. He was always with the roughest of the

boys, and Helen felt glad that he did not come regularly to the school.

The same thought was in the mind of the teacher as he watched the boy during the evening. Perhaps it was a presentiment of trouble to come that made his eyes follow Jack with a thoughtful glance more than once as his rough coarse voice and laugh sounded above the others.

CHAPTER VII

A LOCKOUT.

BEFORE the first of November the fall work was completed on John Ramsay's farm. The corn had been cut and husked, the potatoes had all been gathered, dug and shipped to the city dealers; the apples and winter pears had followed. But the farmhouse cellar was liberally stocked before a single barrel was sent off.

Max liked to go down into the great clean cellar and see the big bins of potatoes and apples and turnips and onions and beets, and the store of beans and squashes and pumpkins and carrots.

"That's the way to have things, I think, Uncle John," he said one day, "instead of sending out to a store every time you want a peck of apples or a bushel of potatoes, as city folks do."

"Huh! So you think there are some good things about a farmer's life?" his uncle inquired giving him a keen glance.

"Some? Well I should say!" answered the boy heartily. "I'd like to know who has a better life than a farmer."

"Hard work—hard work, year in an' year out, with no gay city doin's. You'd get tired of it in short meter," returned the farmer gruffly, but he listened intently for the boy's reply.

"I suppose a fellow gets tired of any kind of work sometimes, Uncle John, but I like the *size* of the country—all out-of-doors to breathe in and look at, instead of city blocks and city streets to crowd and hustle you."

"Hm-m!" was the man's only comment, but in his heart he was greatly pleased.

"That's the kind of chap that suits me," he thought, "but all the same I ain't a-goin' to spoil him," and then he frowned as Tim Barney's words recurred again to his mind. And lest his growing liking for the boy made him too easy with him, the farmer found more and more work for Max to do, and ordered him about more sharply and gruffly than ever.

On the first of November Tim was discharged, and the next morning Max took his first lesson in milking. He had so often watched Tim that he was sure that he himself could do it, but though he tried his best, not a drop of milk could he get, while the gentle little Jersey upon which he was experimenting, moved restlessly, and whipped her tail about, and cast glances of wonder and dissatisfaction at him over her shoulder.

John Ramsay stood by watching the boy's futile attempts in silence. When at last Max

looked up with a very red face, his forehead moist with perspiration in spite of the cold, the farmer exclaimed in a contemptuous tone,

"Thought ye *did* know enough by this time to milk a cow! Get up an' let me have that stool."

The next moment two streams of milk were rattling on the bottom of the shining tin pail, while the Jersey with a sigh of relief, turned again to her manger.

"It looks so easy. I can't see why I can't do it," the boy said to himself as he looked on, but it took more than one trial or two, to catch the trick of it. He persevered, however, until he did catch it, and having done so, found the task left entirely to him, and from then on, he milked the six cows night and morning.

But this was only one of his duties. There were the horses to feed and groom, stables to clean out, hens to attend to night and morning—keeping their house clean and healthy, and when everything else was done there was always wood to saw and chop and pile. So the boy found plenty to do, but still he felt sure that he could do all that was necessary and yet have time for school, if only his uncle would let him go; but he hated to ask for anything, especially to ask of John Ramsay. He wanted so much to go, however, that he determined at last to make the request, but while he was thinking how best to begin it, the farmer himself began gruffly,—

"Your aunt tells me you want to go to school."

"Yes, I do, very much, Uncle John," the boy answered quickly.

"Why didn't ye say so, then?"

"I was just going to. I'll do all the chores, Uncle John. I won't shirk a bit if you'll let me go."

"If I catch ye shirkin' a bit that'll end the school business for *you*," growled the farmer. He did not know how to do a thing graciously. Now he went on, "It's all foolishness anyhow for a great boy like you to keep on goin' to school. You can read an' write an' cipher an' what does a farmer want more'n that? You say you'd like to be a farmer."

"So I would, Uncle John, but I want to be the very best kind of a farmer. I'd like to study farming just as other boys study to be doctors or lawyers or ministers. You know there are agricultural colleges now, just on purpose to fit boys to be the best possible farmers."

"Agricultural fiddlesticks!" exclaimed John Ramsay testily. "Teach the boys all sorts of new-fangled notions, an' I'll warrant when they get through them fellers don't know how to milk a cow any better'n you did a while ago."

Max flushed at this reference to his milking failures, but he answered earnestly,—

"No, I had a talk once with a boy who had been at an agricultural college and he said they

had to really *do* all the different kinds of farm, work ; but they were taught the very best ways of doing things and the why of it all, too."

"Humph!" was the farmer's only comment on this ; then as he turned away, he added shortly, "You can go to school if you want to, only you'd best remember what I told ye."

So, a day or two later, Max went to school with his sister. Her face was bright and happy, but Sepha's gathered gloom as she saw them coming down the road together. She would have preferred to have Helen all to herself on the way to and from school, and so she walked on mostly in silence ; but Helen was so happy that she talked enough for two that morning.

Evidently the fall work was over on other farms besides John Ramsay's, for six or eight boys, most of them older and larger than Max, appeared at the school for the first time that morning. Their appearance was by no means an unmixed pleasure to the master. By this time he had gotten his school in fine running order and had begun to feel that the pupils were really making good progress, but he foresaw that some of the newcomers would be a hindrance rather than a help to him, and so it proved. Perhaps one or two of them came from an honest desire to learn, but most of them came quite as much for "fun" as for work, and they had an immediate effect upon the smaller boys and the older girls—an effect by

no means for the better. There had been good order for some weeks preceding, but on this day there was continual scuffling of heavy boots over the bare floor, rattling of slates, dropping of books and pencils, and all sorts of little annoying sounds and movements, although there was no open disobedience.

One of the most troublesome of the new arrivals was Jack Dunlap. Jack openly declared that he came for "larks," and that he "meant to have them too."

That was a hard day for Mr. Keith, and long before its close he saw that new methods must be adopted if his school work that season was to be the success that he meant it to be. He went home in a thoughtful mood, and that evening he had a talk with the farmer at whose house he boarded; a talk about the school and the teachers who had preceded him. This man was one of the school committee and knew all about the previous history of the school; and the account that he gave was not of a kind to encourage the young teacher.

"You c'n look out for squalls now that Jack Dunlap and Tom Harvey and them other big chaps have appeared," he said. "They pretty near tormented the life out of the little woman that taught there last winter. 'Twas a shame too, for she knew how to teach first-rate, but of course she couldn't cane them great chaps. I offered once to do it for her, but she said 'no.' I'd

a given 'em a dose they'd a remembered for one season anyhow!"

"I don't believe much in that sort of punishment," Mr. Keith returned slowly.

The farmer glanced at him with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"I wouldn't, if I was you," he replied, and he grinned at the mental picture of this quiet young man attempting to use a switch on some of those young giants in his school.

The color deepened a little in the teacher's face, for he guessed the farmer's thoughts, but he said quietly,—

"Is it only disorder and idleness or do they play practical jokes on the teachers? I want to know what to be prepared for."

"Wal! I'd advise ye to be prepared for most everything under the sun. What the rest of 'em don't think of, Jack Dunlap will. He's as full of mischief as an egg is of meat, an' it's pretty apt to be mean mischief too. For one thing—they're sure to lock ye out some morning. They always do that once or twice in a season."

"Out of the schoolhouse, you mean?"

"Yes. Hain't ye noticed them wooden shutters to the windows, with bolts to fasten 'em inside? Well," as the teacher nodded, "some o' these very chaps bought them shutters a year ago an' put 'em on a-purpose so they could have a lock-out whenever they took a notion."

Mr. Keith looked up then in indignant surprise. "But why does the committee allow the shutters to remain on if that's what they are for?" he asked sternly.

"Oh well," answered the farmer in a careless tone, "we don't think it's best to interfere in a little thing like that. It's reely better to have the shutters on when the school ain't runnin', an' we reckon that the teachers we hire will be able to manage the big fellers somehow. That's part of what we hire 'em for—leastwise that's what we hired a man for, this year," and he looked coolly at the teacher to see how he would take that.

He took it very quietly, but behind his glasses his eyes wore an expression that would have made some of his pupils think twice before joining in any rebellious project, had they been there to see it. But they were not there.

Mr. Keith discussed school matters no more that evening with his host, but in the school-room after that he was more than ever on the alert, and very little escaped his quick glances. He saw notes slyly passed from hand to hand; he knew that apples and chestnuts were eaten surreptitiously under desks and behind big geographies, and his keen ears caught many a whispered word never meant to reach them. But through it all he held his peace, and reserved his forces for the outbreak that he felt was sure to

come sooner or later. When that should come, he meant, at least he hoped, to subdue his rebellious subjects completely, and establish his authority once for all.

Some of the boys met him in the woods one Saturday afternoon, and wondered what he was there for. He called out a cheery greeting to them as he walked on swinging a big branch that he had cut from a tree.

"Wonder what he's going to with that hickory limb," one of them said.

"Maybe he's going to call us up for a lickin' Monday," the other replied, and a shout of laughter followed.

It reached the ears of the master and a grim smile curved his firm lips as he muttered to himself, "He laughs best who laughs last, my young gentlemen."

He stopped at the blacksmith's shop before he went home that day, and he went home by way of the schoolhouse, though he might have taken a much shorter route.

The next Monday morning when he entered the schoolroom he found many of the pupils there, and a lively discussion going on. Julia Perkins and several of the older girls claimed his attention at once.

"We're planning a straw-ride," Julia explained, "just a school party you know, Mr. Keith, and of course we want you to go. It will be bright

moonlight all this week, if it doesn't storm, and the sleighing is fine now."

He asked some questions about the arrangements.

"Oh, we go in the great farm wagons—put on runners," the girl explained glibly. "We pile them with clean fresh straw and buffalo robes, and put in hot bricks and flatirons to keep our feet warm, and it's the greatest fun! We sing till we're hoarse as crows."

"And on what night is it to be?"

"We haven't quite decided, but some night this week. My father will drive one wagon and mother will go along to keep us in order. We always take along one or two mothers," was the reply.

The master agreed to make one of the party, which promise evidently gave more satisfaction to the girls than it did to some of the tall young fellows in the back seats. Mr. Keith saw that there was a threatening atmosphere in that quarter, and that atmosphere did not lighten as the morning passed.

After the noon intermission he suddenly decided to give a written examination in arithmetic, hoping thus to give the disturbers of his peace enough to do to keep them quietly busy.

The papers were distributed, the problems written on the blackboard, and the girls and boys set to work. Of course all communication be-

tween them was forbidden during the examination, but twice Mr. Keith saw Jack Dunlap whisper to his seat-mate. The third time the teacher spoke.

"Jack Dunlap, I have seen you whispering three times in the last hour," he said.

Jack looked up with an impudent scowl. "Dunno who I've whispered to," he growled.

"Allow me, then, to introduce you to your seat-mate, Mr. Thomas Harvey," promptly responded the teacher.

There was a ripple of laughter at Jack's expense, and the one thing that made Jack perfectly furious was to be laughed at. He cast a vengeful glance at the teacher, but he was not quick-witted and he could think of no apt retort, so he gloomed in silence, and meditated swift revenge. He knew that a teacher in that district was obliged to keep school a certain number of days, and if for any reason, the school should be closed for one day or more, the time must be made up at the end of the school term. He was thinking of this as he pushed aside his paper contemptuously, making no pretense of further work.

His sister, as usual, was the first to hand in her paper, and she cast a worried glance at Jack as she went back to her seat, a glance to which he responded with an impatient frown. When all the others of the class had handed in their papers, the teacher called for Jack's.

"Tore it up," he responded carelessly.

"Then you can take another paper and begin the work over again," said Mr. Keith.

Jack folded his arms and sat motionless. The teacher glanced at him, then dismissed the class, telling him to remain in his seat, but paying no attention to the order he sprang up and started out with the other boys. Those passing out lingered to see what would follow. To their great surprise, Mr. Keith made no further attempt to hinder Jack's departure. He simply sat and watched him as he roughly pushed aside the smaller boys and marched out with a defiant backward glance.

In another moment not a pupil remained in the room, but still the teacher sat behind his desk looking thoughtfully out through the window. He could see Jack Dunlap in the center of a group of the big boys who were all talking eagerly together. Mr. Keith had no doubt that he himself was the subject under discussion, and he was right. Jack Dunlap considered himself in the light of a school hero, for had he not openly defied the teacher and gotten off scot-free? He was talking largely of what he should say and do if "old Keith" should venture to attempt any punishment the next day.

And the other big fellows were all of the opinion that the teacher was afraid to interfere with them. Several of them were bigger and

stronger than he. They spoke contemptuously of him, for a lack of physical courage was, in their eyes, the worst of all lacks. And the smaller boys tagging along beside and behind these school giants, listened with wide eyes and ears to all the talk, and their respect and admiration for their teacher rapidly dwindled.

But one by one the little fellows dropped off, and Jack kept on past his father's house with some of the older ones; and then he introduced a subject that seemed to afford them all immense satisfaction. Jack walked more than a mile out of his way before the talk was ended, and he turned back home alone.

That night the temperature fell many degrees, and by morning it was intensely cold. Max found it so as, in the chill of early dawn, he tumbled out of bed, dressed himself in his fireless room, his fingers numb with cold, and lighting his lantern hurried out to the barn to milk and feed the cattle, before breakfast.

Helen found it bitter cold as she, too, dressed in that biting atmosphere, and she was glad enough to get down to the warm kitchen and help her aunt about the breakfast work. Mr. Keith found it cold enough several hours later when he set off for school, and he hurried along at a great pace over the hard-crusted snow that crackled and snapped under his feet. The sun shone brightly out of a blue cloudless sky, and the glare on the

wide white stretches was almost blinding. So the teacher hurried on with bent head and for once, wished the way shorter.

"I hope the boys have a good fire going," he thought, glancing up at the chimney as he approached the schoolhouse.

There was plenty of smoke pouring out of the chimney, but something else attracted his attention. Every shutter was tightly closed, and in front of the door stood a crowd of girls and boys shivering in the bitter air and eagerly watching the approach of the master. Some of the little ones were crying.

"It's a lockout, Mr. Keith!" called a dozen voices as the teacher reached the group.

His face flushed with indignation as he looked at the cold faces and wet cheeks of some of the little ones as they stood shivering, with their hands drawn up into their sleeves for warmth.

"It is shameful!" he exclaimed sternly. "Do you know who is inside?"

"No," answered Max Dale, "I'd like to get hold of 'em, whoever they are, Mr. Keith; the girls and these little fellows ought not to stand 'round here any longer. Wouldn't they better go home?"

"In just one moment," and going to one of the shuttered windows, the teacher rapped sharply on it and called upon those inside the building to open the door at once.

Utter silence followed.

Then he tried the door, shaking it with all his strength, but it was stout and strong and resisted all his efforts.

"We might get an axe and break it in," he said thoughtfully, "but I think I can do better than that."

He called the girls and boys across the road out of hearing of even the sharpest ears inside the building, and then dismissed most of them, telling them to go away as quietly as possible so that the rebels in the schoolhouse might not know that they had departed. Some of the older boys he detained.

"Run up and down the road once or twice until you get well warmed up," he said to these, "and then I want you to help me turn the tables on these smart fellows."

Full of eager curiosity, the boys obeyed, and in a few minutes they were back flushed with the exercise, and ready for anything that might be required of them.

They found Mr. Keith standing before one of the windows doing something to the shutters. As the boys crowded around him, he pulled from his pocket a handful of small, wedge-shaped bits of wood.

"Look," was all he said as he deftly inserted one of the pieces into the crack where the two halves of the shutter came together, in the middle

of the window by which he was standing. He slipped one wedge in at the top, then another in the middle and a third at the bottom.

When he turned to the boys, Max Dale's eyes were shining with quick appreciation of the simple but effectual device.

The teacher beckoned them all away from the window, before he said in a low tone, "You catch my idea? Now I want half a dozen of you to go around to the door and stay there talking to each other. Make as much noise as you like—the more the better—and say whatever you feel inclined to say about this business; only don't let out a hint about what we are doing here. Now go and talk—*loud!*"

With chuckles of delight, Max and some other of the larger boys took some of the wedges that Mr. Keith held out to them, while the other boys raced gleefully to the locked door, where they took the fullest possible advantage of the permission given them, and expressed their opinions of the boys inside, in tones calculated to reach to the remotest corner of the interior.

Meantime the teacher and his willing helpers worked swiftly, and in a very few minutes every shutter was securely wedged. It was all done so noiselessly that those within had not the slightest suspicion of what was going on, their attention being concentrated on the noisy demonstration about the door.

When all the shutters were secured, Max executed a silent gleeful war-dance beside the closed windows, but the dance came to an abrupt termination, and his face took on a shadow of anxiety, as he whispered hurriedly,

"But the door, Mr. Keith—you've forgotten the door!"

"Have I? Go and look at it," was the serene reply.

The boys went, and came back with broad grins of delight on their faces.

"You've trapped 'em sure, Mr. Keith," Max said. "However did you think of such a plan?"

"I had to think of something," the teacher answered. "You see I had been warned to expect some such performance as this. "Now I think we've made a good job of this," he went on. "I'd really like to be around when our friends inside discover that they are prisoners, but—what do you say, boys, to having our straw-ride this evening?"

For a moment the boys looked at each other, then they shouted with satisfaction.

"That'll finish 'em up sure!" cried one.

"Why, some of those fellows in there would miss anything sooner than that sleighing party," exclaimed another.

"Well now, since a holiday is forced upon us, I think we may as well enjoy it," continued Mr. Keith. "Suppose we go around and see some of

the girls, and if the plan suits them, we'll have our sleigh-ride this evening."

So, two minutes later, silence reigned without the schoolhouse, and after a while the boys inside silently and cautiously unbolted one shutter and pushed it—but it did not open. The more they pushed, the more firmly those small hickory pieces wedged.

"Try the door!" shouted one, and with growing anxiety, they all rushed to the door and turned the key. It unlocked easily enough, but their united strength, and it was not small, could not open it. No wonder, when it was held by hasp and padlock without.

A more furious set of boys than these at that moment, it would have been hard to find. The master's ears must have burned had there been any truth in the old adage, but fume and threaten as they might, the boys could not get out. They had taken care to carry into the schoolhouse a plentiful supply of wood, and their lunch pails were well filled. They had stuffed their pockets too with nuts and apples in anticipation of the master's laying siege to the place to discover the guilty ones, and they had counted upon having a regular jolly old time in there by themselves, for they had candles and a lamp to illumine the darkness behind the wooden shutters; but when they discovered that they were prisoners all their anticipated jollity speedily disappeared and they sat

about in gloomy silence as the hours passed, wondering how long the master would keep them there. By sunset, their lunch-pails were empty; so were their pockets. Besides, there were duties awaiting them at home, and more than one of them knew that there would be an angry father to demand a reckoning if they failed to appear at "chore time." One of the boys had a watch and that watch was in such demand that the owner felt himself a person of most unusual consequence.

When seven o'clock came and still there was no sound outside, they began to fear that they were to be left there all night. In fact, the indignant teacher had been more than half inclined to let their punishment continue until morning, but he was afraid that they might not have fuel enough inside to keep up the fire, so he relented to some extent.

About half-past seven o'clock the dreary silence without was broken by the sound of approaching sleigh-bells. The boys pricked up their ears and looked at one another. There was a doubtful pause. To call assistance meant to spread abroad the story of their own discomfiture; but on the other hand, they knew that the story would be all over by morning anyhow.

"Shall we call?" asked one doubtfully.

"Yes—let's yell, all together so's to be sure an' make 'em hear," cried another. "But wait till they get nearer."

"Seems to me that's a big lot of jingling for one sleigh," remarked Jack Dunlap suspiciously a moment later.

Then Tom Harvey looked about with a dark flush on his face. "I say," he exclaimed with a groan, "this is the worst yet!"

"What? What d'ye mean?" questioned the others excitedly.

"Hark — they're stopping. No, no! Don't yell—we won't need to," he added in a disconsolate tone.

They listened, their eyes turned towards the door. Yes, Tom was right! There was a rattling sound outside, and then the door was flung open, for they had forgotten to relock it. In the open doorway they saw the master, and outside in the moonlight two big sleighs full of muffled figures.

"I trust you have enjoyed your holiday, gentlemen," the master said politely. "Good evening to you all!" and with that he sprang lightly into one of the waiting sleighs.

There was a shout of derisive laughter, a jingle of bells, a flourish of whips, and the loaded sleighs disappeared with a chorus of song to the tune of "The girl I left behind me."

The boys stood in the doorway for a moment gazing in silence after the fast vanishing sleighs. What was said then is not recorded, but after a little, one of them, pointing to the hasp and staple

by which the door had been secured, remarked grimly, "I wondered the other day what that staple was in the door for—now I know."

"I'm going to see how those shutters were fastened," cried another picking up his lantern. They all followed him, and as they saw those simple little bits of hickory that had proved so effectual, two of them remembered that day when they had met the master in the woods with the hickory branch in his hand. Those two looked at each other but words failed them then.

They understood it all now, and turning away they tramped in moody silence through the moonlight, along the snowy road. Several of them met at home a warmer welcome than they relished, but, angry as they were, not one of them but felt a vast increase of respect for the quiet master who had so cleverly turned the tables on them that day.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COLD CHRISTMAS.

ON the twenty-fourth of December the snow fell steadily all day long, and Helen, looking out of her window at bedtime, could see nothing but white swirling clouds of snowflakes beating against the panes. When she awoke on Christmas morning the storm was over. Her room was flooded with moonlight, but oh, how cold it was ! For a little while she lay still, shivering even under piles of blankets and dreading the getting up in that icy atmosphere.

“ Oh, dear,” she sighed, “ it isn’t much like last Christmas ; and how I do hate to wake Max ; but Uncle John will scold if he isn’t down early, and there isn’t a bit of need of getting up so early in this winter weather, either.”

She sat up pulling a blanket around her, slipped on her stockings and shoes, and ran across to her brother’s room.

“ Merry Christmas, Max dear,” she called softly, as she bent over his bed holding the blanket tightly about her. “ It’s a shame to wake you

so early, but I hear Aunt Mary moving about downstairs, and I'm afraid you'll have lots of shoveling to do."

"Is it snowing now?" the boy asked as he opened his eyes.

"No—but look there!" She pointed to the window banked high with snow outside, while little drifts had sifted through the cracks and lay in feathery piles on the floor.

"Whew-ew!" he exclaimed, "and how cold it is! Must be way below zero. Run back and get dressed, Nellie, before you turn into an icicle. Not much of a Merry Christmas for us this year," he added sadly, as he returned her greeting.

"We have each other, dear," she said, as she stooped and kissed him and then hurried back to dress.

Max sprang up at once and pulled on his clothes as quickly as possible. He had to wash his face and hands at the kitchen sink, for water would have been frozen solid had there been any in his room. As he entered the kitchen his aunt was just coming from the yard with a pail of water. She had a thick shawl pinned over her head, but her face looked almost blue with the cold, and her skirts were white with snow.

"Oh, auntie, *did* I forget to fill that pail for you last night?" the boy exclaimed remorsefully. "I'm awfully ashamed."

"An' ye ought to be," growled the farmer harshly before his wife could answer.

He was sitting with his hands spread out over the stove. His right leg was swathed in red flannel and he had a heavy gray shawl drawn over his shoulders. He was suffering from an attack of rheumatism, and felt the cold as he never had done before ; but he was a most trying invalid, for he fretted continually over his enforced idleness, and was querulous and impatient with everything and everybody.

Max made no reply, but his silence annoyed the man as much as any spoken word, for he took it, as a tacit reproach to himself. He added sharply,—

"Ye oughter been out to the barn an hour ago. The critters'll think they're never goin' to be fed."

"They'll have their breakfast before long now, Uncle John, as soon as I can shovel a path to the barn," the boy answered patiently. He did not look at his uncle as he spoke, but smiled brightly into his aunt's tired face. He was growing very fond of the gentle, timid little woman.

John Ramsay caught that quick friendly interchange of looks between the two, and his face darkened yet more.

"Never looks at me, any more'n if I was a dog!" he said to himself. "I'm no account to anybody now, I'm laid aside, an' need a little waitin' on."

Max caught up a snow shovel from the entry

and went out just as his sister came into the kitchen from the other door with a merry greeting on her lips

"Shut them doors!" shouted the farmer sharply, drawing his shawl more closely about him as he felt the draught.

Both doors were closed before the words were fairly uttered, but the light had faded from the girl's eyes and the Christmas greeting died on her lips. It was so hard to say "Merry Christmas" to a man who scowled savagely at you the moment you came near him. She set her lips together angrily, but then she caught an appealing glance from her aunt, and she turned quickly and went over to the muffled figure crouching over the stove.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle John," she said gently. "I hope you are feeling better this morning."

"No I ain't," he answered sharply, but as he looked up at her his face softened a little. Not even to himself nowadays, would he own that he liked to see the girl's slender figure flitting about the house and to hear the clear girlish voice humming a gay little tune, or chattering away to his wife—but he did like it all the same, and gruff as he often was with her he would have missed Helen sorely.

"I'm sorry," she answered with a feeling of self-reproach as she looked down into his pain-

lined face. Then she followed her aunt into the pantry. Swinging the door lightly to behind her, she put her arms about the little woman's neck and kissed her on either cheek.

"Merry Christmas, auntie dear," she whispered softly.

Her aunt returned the caress heartily as she answered, with a wistful look into the young face,—

"I wish it *might* be a merry Christmas for you, child—and for Max." Then with a nod towards the kitchen she added softly,—“Don't mind if he seems a little fractious, dear. He's suffering a deal with his rheumatism; it kept him awake most of the night.”

"And kept you awake, too, I'm afraid," the girl replied, noting the tired eyes and white cheeks.

"Oh, it's no matter 'bout me," Mrs. Ramsay returned hastily, as she went back to the kitchen with a pitcher of milk and a bowl of eggs.

"What's all the whisperin' about?" demanded her husband suspiciously, glancing from one to the other as Helen began to set the table.

"Nothin', John. I was only tellin' Helen what a bad night you'd had," his wife answered meekly, while Helen said to herself,—

"Oh dear, I wonder whether it is *all* rheumatism that makes him so cross. Seems to me some of it is just pure ugliness, but I wouldn't grieve auntie by hinting at such an opinion."

When the light, flaky biscuits brown to just the

right shade, had been drawn from the oven, the ham done to a turn, and the potato balls, crisp and puffy, looked delightfully tempting, while the coffee filled the kitchen with a delicious fragrance,—the farmer became impatient for his breakfast.

“What you waitin’ for?” he demanded of his wife.

“For Max,” she answered glancing again through the window towards the barn. “He’s havin’ a real hard time, John, there’s an awful big drift right in front of the barn door. He hasn’t got through it yet.”

“Well, he’s been fooling away his time!” exclaimed the farmer obstinately. “He ought to a been through it long ’fore this an’ had the cattle fed an’ the milkin’ done too!”

He saw the indignant flash in Helen’s eyes and his face hardened.

“Breakfast ain’t goin’ to wait any longer!” he declared decidedly. “You put it on the table this minute, Mary!”

“You can have yours if you want it, John, but let me keep the rest hot on the stove. Max will be chilled to the bone working so long out in this cold,” his wife pleaded.

But the farmer was in an obstinate mood now. “I’ll have my own way in my own house yet awhile!” he exclaimed. “You’ll put the breakfast on the table *now*, an’ you an’ Helen’ll set

down an' eat *now*, or else you can go without till dinner time. I ain't goin' to have everything in the house upset for that boy—an' I want ye to understand that, once for all!"

"Why—*John!*" his wife exclaimed in a frightened tone, for, hard and sharp as he often was he had never before taken any such stand as this. But then he had never before been crippled with rheumatism, or had any one in his family to take his wife's attention away from him when he felt in special need of it.

"I mean it!" he added glaring at her, but never glancing again at the white face and burning eyes of the girl.

Without another word, Mrs. Ramsay began setting the food on the table. Helen helped her, but when all was ready she did not sit down at the table.

"I don't want any breakfast, auntie, I'm not hungry," she said, and she went to the window and watched her brother as he tunneled slowly through the huge drift, only stopping now and then to stand up and ease his back. Her eyes were hot and dry, and she felt as if a mouthful of food would choke her.

The farmer had had his way, but somehow his appetite too was spoiled. Perhaps it was spoiled by the sight of the girlish figure by the window; or perhaps by the miserable face of his wife. She made a pretense of eating, but she could not talk

and he ate in silence. When he had finished, his wife helped him back to his seat by the fire. Then she set some of the breakfast in the oven for Max, and as she went about the kitchen she cast many an anxious glance out at the boy. She longed to speak to Helen, but dared not do it in her husband's hearing. She was so afraid that he would get "set" against the girl or her brother.

Suddenly Helen sprang up and opened the door and Max stumbled in covered with snow. His face was almost as white as the snow, and he was gasping for breath.

"Oh, Max—what *is* the matter?" Helen cried bending over him as he stumbled blindly into a chair.

"Only—tired," he panted. "Don't worry."

His aunt stood gazing at him with a troubled face. Even John Ramsay looked somewhat disturbed and uneasy, but his face settled into its usual hardness when he found that the boy had met with no accident. The rest and warmth soon brought back his breath and color, and a cup of hot coffee made him feel like himself again.

"Guess I had rather too big a job of shoveling for one heat," he said. "I never saw such a drift."

"Humph!" growled the farmer. "'Tain't nothin' uncommon. I've shoveled through bigger drift's 'n' that many a time."

"Sit right up to the table, Max, and eat your breakfast," his aunt broke in hastily. The boy

pulled his chair to the table and helped himself to a biscuit and a piece of ham. His uncle watched him in silence for a moment, then he asked,—

“Have ye fed all the stock?”

“Why no, Uncle John, I haven’t fed any yet—except myself,” Max answered with a laugh, as he took a mouthful of the meat.

“What?” exclaimed the farmer, “Ye’ve been foolin’ ’round out in the snow all this time?”

“But, Uncle John!” exclaimed Max, too much astonished at first to be angry. “Have you looked out to the barn?”

“No, I hain’t, an’ what’s more I ain’t agoin’ to,” the man responded impatiently. “I don’t care how big the drifts are! You’ve been out there long enough to shovel away a drift as big as the barn itself.”

Max opened his mouth to remonstrate, then seeing the obstinate look on his uncle’s face, thought better of it, and went on with his breakfast in silence. But John Ramsay was in a quarrelsome mood and he continued in a rasping tone,—

“I never let my cows an’ horses go without their feed till this time o’ day—never!”

“Perhaps you’d rather I’d go without mine, and feed them now,” suggested the boy, his anger rising as he thought how long he had been working out there in that huge snowdrift.

“No perhaps about it,” retorted the farmer.

"Of course the stock ought to be fed before you are."

A quick angry flame leaped into the boy's eyes at this. He felt that he had borne patiently with grumbling and fault-finding, long enough. A torrent of bitter words beat at his lips; he kept them back, but he had hard work to do it, as he hastily pushed aside his plate and, springing up, snatched his cap and overcoat and left the kitchen.

"Oh, John! How *could* you—when he's been working so hard ever since he got up? He needed his breakfast an' he ought to have had it before he did another thing," moaned Mrs. Ramsay, while Helen hastily left the kitchen, not daring to trust her quick tongue any longer.

As the door closed behind the girl, the farmer's wife suddenly faced him and burst out crying. "You're cruel to them children, John Ramsay—cruel!" she sobbed, "Helen hain't eaten a single mouthful this morning, just because of you, an' now Max has gone an' left his breakfast, and all because you're so cross an' unreasonable. I *will* say it—I don't care if you are sick! Max has stood more fault-fandin' from you than a little, since you've been laid up. He's kept his temper when you've said the most aggravatin' things—but you'll go too far with him if you don't look out, an' when he *does* once get real mad, he won't get over it in a hurry—you'll find that out. He's just like his mother, that way."

She stopped to wipe her eyes, and then, seeing the expression of utter amazement and rising anger on her husband's face, her new-born courage suddenly failed her, and she began to tremble, and turning her back on him began hurriedly to clear the table in silence.

As for John Ramsay, he could not have been much more astonished if one of his Jersey calves had suddenly opened his mouth and denounced him as a cruel tyrant. Never before, in all the years of their married life, had his wife spoken to him like that. She never would have done it in her own behalf—he was sure of that. He sat watching her, nursing his anger against her, and defending himself to his own conscience.

“Pretty state o’ things if I can’t say what I choose in my own house,” he said to himself. “If them two are goin’ to make trouble between me’n Mary—it was always me and Mary, in John Ramsay’s mind, never Mary and me—then—” but angry as he was he left that sentence unfinished.

Max did not return to the house except to bring the milk, and then he merely set the foaming pails in the pantry, and marched out without a word or a glance to any one. John Ramsay furtively watching the stern young face, felt vaguely uncomfortable, and he did not speak to the boy again. His aunt said softly,—

“Won’t you have something to eat now, Max?” but he shook his head and went out again.

The henhouse was buried so that it looked like a huge drift; he had to unearth that, and clear a space for the fowls to get out before he fed and watered them. Then he shoveled a path to the well, and then to the woodpile—and filled up the woodboxes. After that he cleared a path to the cornerrib. Even where there were no drifts, the snow was very deep, and the stinging north wind blew it about so that in some places he had to shovel a second time; but he kept at it doggedly, his anger against his uncle all the while burning hot in his heart.

He had tried so hard to be patient; he had worked so faithfully, especially since his uncle had been sick, trying to do, if possible, even more than was required of him, and it all seemed so useless. Try as he might he could not please the man. Never once had John Ramsay given him a word of praise or approval—never once since he came there.

“I’m sick of it—dead sick of it,” he said to himself, “and what’s more I’ll find some way out of it.”

Then he saw Helen, with a woolen hood on her head and a big shawl wrapped around her, coming towards him.

“It’s too cold for you out here, Helen,” he called, “better go back.”

He did not feel like talking then, even to his sister. But she would not go back.

"Isn't it comfortable enough in the barn?" she asked. "I guess it is, wrapped up as I am. Come on, Max, I want to talk to you."

"Don't believe I feel like talking, Nellie," he answered, taking up another shovelful of snow.

She laid her hand gently on his arm. "Please brother," she urged. "It's Christmas Day, you know—and I want you."

He could not refuse her when she urged him so; and rather unwillingly he flung aside his shovel and followed her into the barn. Once inside, he proceeded to make her comfortable. He dug out a nest for her in the hay, where the cold wintry sunlight from the window made it a trifle less bitter, and piled the hay up around her until only her head was uncovered.

"This isn't a bit bad," she laughed. "Now burrow under the hay yourself, so you will be as comfortable as I am."

"Oh, I'm warm enough now," he replied, but he flung himself down beside her. There was a gloomy expression in his dark eyes, and he did not look at her.

She began pulling out one arm.

"Better keep it covered up," he cautioned.

But the arm came up, and with it a tin pail that had been hidden under the big shawl.

"I don't want anything," the boy exclaimed hastily, as he caught sight of the pail.

"Yes you do, Max—when Aunt Mary sent it out to you. She'll feel dreadfully if you don't eat it—every mouthful of it. Helen answered.

There were some chicken sandwiches and some thick soft molasses cookies just out of the oven; such cookies as only Aunt Mary could make.

Helen opened the pail and held it out to him. "Please, Max," she pleaded, and to please her he took some, and after the first mouthful his healthy appetite, whetted by the hard work he had been doing, made him eagerly swallow every mouthful.

"You feel better now, don't you—you poor dear boy!" Helen exclaimed in a tone of satisfaction, as she set aside the empty pail. Then her face darkened. "Max, I never was so angry with anybody in *all my life* as I was with Uncle John this morning," she cried.

Her brother said nothing, but his face reflected the shadow on hers.

"If he wasn't sick, I don't know as I *could* forgive him," she went on, "but Aunt Mary says that he suffers dreadfully with his rheumatism, and that that is what makes him so cross and unjust."

"Guess he's always had rheumatism, then," returned the boy, gloomily.

"But, Max," his sister went on after a moment's

silence, "don't let's talk about Uncle John any more." She banished the shadow from her face and looked at him brightly. "Don't you want to see your Christmas present?" she asked.

"Christmas present?" he echoed. "Where would a Christmas present come from in this snow desert?"

For answer, she pulled a long box from her pocket and held it out to him. He opened it and found two neckties.

"It's awfully little, Max, but you know the state of my pocketbook," she said, trying to speak gaily.

"They're *exactly* what I wanted, for mine are all pretty shabby," he answered, "but, Helen, how in the world did you get them, here?"

"I have two or three friends—and correspondents—in Springfield," she reminded him.

"And I was such a chump that I never once thought of getting some one else to select something for me—for you," he answered regretfully. "I'm awfully sorry, Nellie."

"As if I cared!" she returned quickly, as she leaned her head for a moment against his shoulder.

"But *I* care," he answered; then after a moment's silence he added gravely, "Helen, has Aunt Mary said anything to you about money, for clothes or anything of that sort?"

"No—I don't think she ever has any money

herself, except what she gets for the eggs she sends to market."

"What a shame!" exclaimed the boy indignantly, "when she works just as hard in the house as Uncle John does out of it!"

"Indeed she does. She's making thirty pounds of butter a week right along now, besides all the cooking and housework."

"I know," Max replied thoughtfully "and I don't have even egg money; and I do fully as much work as Tim Barney did, and he had twenty five dollars a month besides his board. I have only my board. I don't mean that I want Uncle John to pay me wages," he added hastily, "but I'm growing out of all my clothes, and this suit is about done for, anyhow, and my shoes are giving out, too."

"Yes, Max, I've noticed that, and I've been hoping that Uncle John would speak to you about it."

"I'd feel to-day like flinging it back at him if he should offer me any money, even for shoes," the boy muttered angrily.

Helen made no answer, and her brother went on: "The few dollars I had when we came here have gone for repairs on my shoes, and for postage and church contributions."

"Yes, postage and church have taken mine too," Helen replied, "but you have the gold piece that Uncle Henry gave you last Christmas, haven't you, Max!"

"No," he answered briefly.

She looked at him in surprise, wondering when he had spent it, but he said no more, and she did not quite like to question him further. So after a moment she pushed aside the hay and stood up.

"I must go in now," she said, "for I'm going to help cook the dinner. "We're to have chicken-pie and I'm to make it, so you'll have to say it is good, whether you think so or not," she laughed, as she picked up her pail and hurried into the house.

Max sat still for a few minutes, his eyes full of grave thoughtfulness; then he went back to his shoveling, but his little talk with his sister—and perhaps also the luncheon she had brought him—had made things in general look brighter to him, and when he answered the summons to dinner his face was much less somber, and he tried to second Helen's attempts at conversation at the dinner-table. But it was a difficult matter to carry on a conversation when the master of the house would not utter a word, and his wife spoke only in answer to a question, and then in a low tone, with a quick, deprecating glance at the silent, gloomy-faced man opposite. Max praised the chicken-pie enough to satisfy his sister, and though the farmer spoke no word of praise, he passed his plate for a second helping.

The dinner work done, Helen ran up to her room to change her dress and brush her hair.

When she came down she was chilled through, and her fingers were numb with cold. As she stood warming her hands over the stove Mrs. Ramsay looked at her and then asked suddenly, "Where is Max?"

"I hear him chopping at the woodpile," the girl answered.

Mrs. Ramsay went to the door and called him. Her husband looked at her curiously from under his heavy eyebrows, but she did not so much as glance at him.

"Max," she said, when the boy came in response to her call, "you've done work enough out-doors to-day. It's Christmas Day, and I don't want you out there chopping wood. There's a plenty cut already. But I wish you'd come up-stairs and help me set up a stove in Helen's room. The child must not dress up there in such cold weather as this without a fire."

Her husband gazed at her as if he could not believe his ears. Never before had she ventured to act in this independent fashion. But then, never before had she had children to bring out the mother-love and mother-courage so often hidden in the hearts of timid, shrinking women, who would never think of asserting their own independence. Now she did not even glance towards the dark face of her husband, but turned at once towards the door, and Max, with a smile of satisfaction at his sister, followed her.

The two left in the kitchen could hear footsteps and voices in the attic, but neither spoke until Mrs. Ramsay and Max came back.

"Now carry up a supply of wood and kindlin's," the little woman said calmly, "and fix a fire ready to light, and when Helen goes up to bed she can start the fire and the room will be comfortable in a few minutes."

"Oh, auntie, that will be so nice!" the girl exclaimed gratefully.

"Indeed it will," her brother added, "for Helen took a heavy cold about this time last year, and she didn't really get over it until warm weather."

"Huh!" grunted the farmer in a scoffing tone, but no one appeared to notice.

"Oh, there's Sepha! I wonder if she has any letters for us," cried Helen a moment later. Snatching up a shawl, she flung it about her and went out on the porch.

Sepha, her cheeks glowing with a deep pink, and her eyes shining, was perched on one of her father's farm horses.

"Oh, Sepha, come in—come in, before you freeze!" cried Helen; but the other girl only laughed.

"I'm not cold. I'm bundled up in too many wraps," she answered. "Do you want a letter?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Helen, eagerly holding out her hand.

"For your brother," Sepha ended with a mis

chievous laugh. Then, with a quick change to earnestness, she added, "I wish it *was* for you," and she tossed the letter over to Helen. "Merry Christmas!" she called out as she pulled the horse's head around.

"Merry Christmas to you, Sepha, and thank you so much for bringing up the mail," returned Helen. Then with a sudden thought, she added, "but wait a minute. I've something of yours in the house," and without waiting for a reply, she disappeared. She was back again in two minutes with a tiny box in her hand.

"Not to be opened till you get home," she said as she handed it to Sepha who, with a look of wondering curiosity in her eyes, said "good-by" and rode off, for in spite of her warm wrap, she did not care to remain out long in the intense cold.

With the letter in her hand, Helen ran out to the barn where her brother was.

"Max, Max!" she called eagerly, "come up to my room and let's light the fire. Sepha has brought you a letter from Mr. Wade."

"From Mr. Wade?" echoed Max, and flinging aside the harness he had been cleaning, he followed her into the house.

It took but a moment to start the wood fire, and its pleasant glow soon made the small room comfortable, but Max forgot all about the stove as he tore open the letter from his uncle's lawyer

and hurriedly read the contents. His sister, looking over his shoulder, read with him, and having done so, softly clapped her hands as she cried,—

“Oh, that’s good—isn’t it, Max! Two hundred and fifty dollars for us!”

“It’s better than nothing, but I wish it had been more,” he answered thoughtfully.

“So do I, of course, but it seems good to know that we have even this much. You might get you some clothes now, Max.”

She made no reference to her own wants in that line, for she too had been “running up” in the past months, and had outgrown most of her dresses.

Her brother answered gravely, as he folded the letter, “No—I think we must save this money for—any emergency; and as to clothes,” his face flushed as he spoke, “if I can’t earn my clothes as well as my board here, I’ll hire out to somebody else this summer. I could get a place easy enough where I’d have at least eight or ten dollars a month besides my board.”

“Oh, Max, you wouldn’t do that, would you?” the girl cried. “Uncle John would be dreadfully angry.”

“Well—why doesn’t he get me the clothes I need, then?” demanded the boy impatiently. “Helen, I’m getting dead tired of the way things go here!”

“But auntie, Max, don’t forget her,” urged the

girl. "I'm sure she would get anything we need if she could."

"*If* she could—yes—but there's the rub. She can't do it," he returned moodily. "Oh, well, we won't worry about it just yet. "No matter how things go, of course I must stay on here until Uncle John gets about again, then we'll see. I'm afraid it's too rough a road for me to travel on very much longer. But look here, Helen—auntie told me I need not work any more to-day—except the chores at night—of course those must be done—so I believe I'll sit up here and read a while. If I go down to the kitchen he'll glower at me."

Helen sighed. "I wish I could stay up here with you," she said, "but I think I ought to go down for auntie's sake."

She carried down with her a little package which she dropped softly into her aunt's workbasket as she passed her. Mrs. Ramsay moved slightly so that her back was towards her husband as she opened the little parcel. It contained a set of collar and cuffs of thin white lawn, beautifully hem-stitched, and with them was a slip of paper on which was written, "With Helen's dear love."

No one saw the tears that dimmed the faded blue eyes, and no word was spoken then, but later, when Helen followed her to the pantry she gave the girl a quick, almost passionate kiss, as she whispered, "It's the very first Christmas gift I ever had. May God bless you—my child."

Her voice lingered tremulously on that last tender word; so tender was it that the girl felt her own eyes wet, though she knew not why, as she turned away.

When Helen went up to bed that night she looked out of her window and saw a light in Sepha's room. If she could have looked into that room she would have seen the girl alone there, looking for the hundredth time at the little silver pin that Helen had selected for her from her own small store of ornaments. Sepha had no store at all of such things as girls love, and this would have been precious to her however it had come to her, but as a gift from the new friend upon whom she secretly lavished a wealth of affection, the half of which Helen had never guessed, it was a treasure indeed, fit only to be taken out and admired in secret, but never for a moment to be worn. In Sepha's eyes it was far too precious for that.

When Helen got into bed that night, her hand touched a tiny package which she fingered wonderingly for a moment. Then, all in the dark, she unfolded it, and the next moment she buried her face in her pillow with a little sob, for she had no need of eyes to tell her that Max had given her for a Christmas gift the one thing he had to give,—his ten-dollar gold piece.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTERRUPTED FRIENDSHIP.

ON that bitter Christmas Day it had seemed to Helen as if those huge drifts never would melt away, but by the last of March there were only thin patches of snow here and there on the brown fields—patches which the sun's warm breath diminished day by day. The buds were swelling on the branches of the trees, and the purple and yellow crocus blossoms were peeping through the brown mold in the garden beds; while the occasional flash of a blue wing, or the thrill of bird music among the leafless branches, gave promise of an early spring.

The strong vitality of John Ramsay had for the time gotten the better of the disease that had held him captive through the winter. He was out and at work with a restless energy that would have all in his household work as hard and as steadily as he himself did. Under this tireless industry lurked the unacknowledged fear and dread of the future, when the enemy that he had temporarily overcome should again seize upon him and force him into that terrible idleness and helplessness

that had been so much harder for him to bear than all the pain and suffering which accompanied them. Before and after school he now kept Max constantly at work, and on the last day of March he said to the boy, as he was hurrying off,—

“Max—this ends your schoolin’. There’ll be work enough to keep you busy all day after this.”

“Very well, sir,” the boy answered, as he turned away with rather a sober face.

“Oh, Max, I’m so sorry! I did hope you could go until May,” Helen said, as he joined her.

“So did I, but I can’t complain. Several of the big fellows left last week, you know,” he answered.

Sepha came running out as the two reached the corner. She had a shawl over her head, for there was a sting in the March wind still, but her eyes were dancing and her face was bright.

“I’m not going to school,” she announced; then with a gleeful intonation she added, “Sarah Barnes is sick.”

“You don’t look very sorry, Sepha,” Helen answered laughing.

“I’m sorry that I’m not going to school. Please tell Mr. Keith why, Helen—but as to Sarah Barnes—no, I’m not sorry one bit. I’m real glad!”

“Why, Sepha, to think that you should be so hard-hearted!” cried Max gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes.

Sepha laughed back at him as Helen inquired,—
“What’s the matter with Sarah Barnes?”

“Colic. Ate something that disagreed with her. I guess ’twas some of her own sour bread. It disagrees with me—always,” and Sepha’s white teeth flashed again.

“So you’ve got to do the housework. Oh Sepha—you’ll have a chance to cook, won’t you?” Helen added.

The girl nodded gaily. “That’s it. That’s why I’m not a bit sorry,” she cried. “Stop as you go home, Helen, and I’ll tell you how I succeed.”

“You’ll succeed all right. Won’t you invite me to supper?” Helen laughed as she and her brother went on. She tossed back a kiss to little Patty, who was looking at her from the window, and Patty returned it with interest.

“Sepha has been longing for a chance to surprise her father with some of her cooking,” Helen said as they walked on. You know she has been up to our house almost every Saturday, and Aunt Mary has given us both cooking lessons. She says that Sepha will make a better cook than I. She has a special gift for it.”

“I don’t blame her if she hasn’t much sympathy for that Barnes woman. Makes me sick to look at her,” returned Max, then he added, “That Jack Dunlap’s a bad lot. Pity he’s Sepha’s brother.”

"Yes, that's what I always think," Helen answered with sudden gravity.

Her brother went on, "I don't see why Mr. Keith doesn't bounce him, anyhow. I'd help him and be glad to, if Jack should show fight as I expect he would."

"But maybe those other big fellows would take Jack's part and then there'd be a general fight in the school, and that would be so disgraceful," Helen objected.

"No more disgraceful than to let Jack Dunlap carry on as he has lately," returned her brother, "and besides those big chaps think that Mr. Keith is afraid to tackle them. I'd show 'em if I was in teacher's place!" and Max drew himself up with a very warlike air.

Evidently, spring work was beginning on other farms beside John Ramsay's, for most of the big fellows were to leave school that night, consequently they were in no mood for study.

Since the "lockout" that Mr. Keith had turned into a "lock-in," his older pupils had been much less troublesome in the schoolroom. If the young teacher was, as they believed, lacking in muscle, and therefore inclined to shrink from anything in the nature of a fight, still they knew now, that what he lacked in brawn he made up in brain, and they were not inclined to risk such another turning of the tables as that which had made them for the time, the laughing-stock of the neighborhood, and

especially of the girls. So until this day matters had gone fairly well in the school, although Jack Dunlap had been, all along, a disturbing element, and Mr. Keith had exhausted his resources in the vain attempt to make him behave himself, and learn something.

He had put the boy finally, in one of the front seats among the smaller scholars, and Jack, for some unknown reason, had not refused to occupy the seat as the teacher had more than half expected him to do. The boy was by no means dull, and perhaps he realized that he had tried the master's patience as far as it was safe to do. But on this last day of March, the hard-won order and restraint, seemed to be overthrown in a single hour.

Knowing that on the morrow, most of his tormentors would be absent, Mr. Keith wanted, if possible, to prevent any serious outbreak, and so he tried in all sorts of ways to awaken and maintain their interest in the work of the day. It was all in vain. The recitations dragged; the songs were lifeless; and Jack Dunlap surpassed all his previous efforts in the line of disorder and disturbance. He kept the small boys among whom he was sitting, in a state of alternate hilarity and indignation, yet he did it all so slyly that the teacher could not catch him in the act. But Jack's evil hour had come when, as Mr. Keith was standing at the board explaining a problem, Tommy

Aitken went down the aisle to him. Tommy was only five, and one of the smallest boys in school. As he passed along, Jack suddenly thrust out his foot and the little fellow fell headlong over it. He struck his face heavily on the floor, cutting his lip and setting his nose to bleeding.

Mr. Keith had turned just in time to see the whole affair. He sprang forward and picked up the little fellow, and sent Mary Bond out with him to care for his wounded face and his wounded feelings, and then, to Jack's unbounded amazement, and to the surprise and indignation of the best element in the school—the master calmly sent one of the girls to the board to work out a problem as if nothing had happened, saying not a word to Jack! Then he walked slowly to the back of the room and paced back and forth there as he often did during a recitation. The mischievous pupils, having their backs to him, dared not continue their pranks because they could not tell whether or no his eye was upon them. Now and then he would walk down one aisle and up another in his quiet deliberate way. Jack, not quite sure whether the teacher knew who was responsible for Tommy Aitken's disaster, for once sat quietly watching the work of the girl at the board, when Mr. Keith came slowly down the aisle behind him. As he approached Jack's seat he took from his coat pocket a leather strap with a buckle on one end. The other end was passed through

the buckle, making a big loop. Suddenly, without warning, this loop descended over Jack Dunlap's shoulders and was instantly drawn tight, pinning his arms to his sides. He started up angrily and tried to slip off the lasso, but his struggles only tightened it as Mr. Keith pulled upon the strap until the boy winced with the pain.

"Come!" said the teacher sternly, pulling Jack towards the door.

The boy clutched at his desk and held back, but the strap tightened until the pain was unendurable. He let go his hold, and at once Mr. Keith jerked him across the room and out of the door. Once outside, while the whole school crowded to the door to see what was to follow, Mr. Keith dexterously tripped his captive, and then with his knee on the boy's chest, asked him if he would go directly home if the strap were removed.

"No, I won't!" Jack shouted furiously.

"Very well then—I shall have to use another strap," replied the teacher calmly, and turning the boy over on his face in spite of his struggles, he applied the other strap so lustily, that Jack, writhing with pain and shame, soon cried out sulkily, "Le' me up, an' I'll go."

Mr. Keith at once removed the lasso, but he stood on guard not knowing what to expect. Jack however had caught sight of the crowd of grinning faces about the door and the steps, and

the instant he was free, he started up the road on the run, and the school knew him no more that season, while the big boys had again to revise their opinion of their quiet young teacher.

"I'm so glad that Sepha was absent to-day," Helen said to her brother as they talked over the affair on their way home after school.

"So am I. She'd have felt badly of course, since that chump is her brother after all."

"I wish we could keep her from hearing about it," Helen went on, "but somebody or other will be certain to tell her."

"Jack won't—that's one sure thing," laughed Max, who was rejoicing not only that Jack Dunlap had gotten what he deserved at last, but also that his teacher had proved himself anything but afraid.

They caught a glimpse of Jack in the barnyard as they approached, but he saw them too, and quickly disappeared. Sepha ran out to ask about the lessons for the next day, and Helen answered her questions and hurried on, so that her friend might not be out there when some of the other girls came along.

Sepha was looking bright and happy. She told Helen that her dinner had been a success, but it was several days before the latter heard the whole story of Sepha's day of triumph.

She had stood at the window that morning looking rather longingly after Helen and Max

for a few minutes, then she had turned with a smile to her little sister.

"Now, Patty, I'm cook. What do you want for dinner to-day?" she asked.

"Chicken-pie—just like Mrs. Ramsay's," was the prompt reply.

"All right. I'd as soon make that as anything, but you must run and ask father to kill a chicken for me. There he is in the barn doorway."

Patty's face grew sober. She had not remembered that chicken-pie meant death to a chicken, but she went slowly across the yard and delivered her sister's message. Then she came hastily back with her hand covering her eyes except just a crack through which she peeped.

"Why, what's the matter, Patty?" her sister asked as she entered the kitchen.

"It's the chicken—I didn't want to look for fear I'd see the one that's got to be killed," the child said sorrowfully.

"Oh well, girlie, you mustn't worry about that. Chickens are hatched to be eaten you know," Sepha comforted her. "And now what do you want for dessert?"

"Plum-pudding!" Patty replied, forgetting her sympathy for the doomed chicken, as her sister meant that she should, "and I can stone the raisins, can't I, Sepha?" she added happily.

"Yes—that's your part of the cooking," Sepha answered, and the little maiden was speedily

seated in the pantry with raisins and a bowl of hot water before her.

Then Sepha with a sort of gleeful zeal, moved chairs and table out of the kitchen and filled a big pail with boiling water. Soft soap she had too, and plenty of it, and scrubbing-brush and cloth as well. Not for many a day had that kitchen floor suffered such a scrubbing as it received that morning, and when the work was done the girl's eyes beamed with satisfaction in spite of aching back and arms.

"I guess," remarked Patty in her grown-up fashion, as she looked over her shoulder into the kitchen, "I guess that floor'll have to be introduced to itself, won't it?"

"Sarah Barnes may have to be introduced to it," laughed Sepha as she proceeded to dress the chicken that her father had brought to her.

She was busy every minute of the time that morning, but it was a happy business that she and the little sister both enjoyed, and it was a proud moment for the young cook when her father sat down to the table and looked with pleased surprise at the dinner that was before him. It was long since there had been seen on his table such a chicken-pie as that, with its light tender crust and thoroughly cooked and seasoned meat. The potato too, beaten to a puffy lightness; the beets boiled and sliced and arranged after a tasty fashion of Sepha's own, and the cranberry

jelly molded and turned out on a glass dish—to say nothing of the plum-pudding—all this quite amazed and bewildered Mr. Dunlap.

“Why—who—who’s the new cook?” he inquired doubtfully, and when he understood that Sepha had done all herself—he looked at her in wonder. He had given few thoughts to his children of late. He suddenly began to realize that one of them, at least, was growing up.

He ate his dinner and enjoyed it, but more than once Sepha caught his eyes watching her face half furtively, and she wished she could know what he was thinking.

The supper was as good as the dinner. Jack was at the table then, but Sepha could learn from him nothing of the day’s doings at school. That did not surprise her, however, for Jack seldom told her anything. He disappeared after supper, as he usually did, and Sepha washed the dishes and put Patty to bed. Then she brought her books to the table where her father sat reading, and spent an hour or two over the lesson for the next day. When she put aside her books her father inquired how Sarah Barnes was.

“She’s better—says she’ll be around again to-morrow,” the girl answered. “I most wish she wouldn’t, father.”

To her surprise her father replied, “So do I,” and the girl went to her room with a light heart, saying to herself,—

"Maybe he'll let me do all the cooking by and by, and then we can get rid of Sarah Barnes altogether."

When Helen set off for school the next morning, she saw a short stout figure coming down the road.

"That's Lizzie Pidge," she said to herself, "I hope she won't catch up with me," and she walked on at a rapid pace.

But Lizzie Pidge meant to catch up with her, and she called in her thick, husky voice, "Helen—Helen Dale! Wait for me."

Helen did not want to be rude or to needlessly offend the girl, so she turned and waited with what patience she could.

"What made you hurry so? Didn't you see me coming?" Lizzie asked breathlessly as she came up, her face very red.

"I want to get to school early this morning, and I always stop for Sepha," Helen replied, ignoring the second question.

"Yes, I know you two are awfully intimate," Lizzie remarked, as she hooked her arm into Helen's.

Helen did not like either the hooking or the remark. She answered coldly, "I'm not 'awfully intimate' with anybody, Lizzie."

"Oh, ain't you? I thought you were with Sepha Dunlap. She's an awfully queer girl, ain't she?"

"Queer—how? I think she's one of the nicest girls I know," answered Helen loyally.

"Oh—nice, of course, but you know what I mean. She's not a bit like other girls."

"So much the worse for the other girls," replied Helen coolly.

Lizzie darted a sly questioning glance at her, then she went on,—

"Isn't it horrid of her father to let her go so shabby? They say he's a regular miser."

To this Helen made no response whatever. They were approaching the crossroads now, and could see Sepha and Patty waiting on the porch. Lizzie went on hastily, "Jack Dunlap got just what he deserved yesterday—don't you think so?"

Forgetting for an instant who it was that asked the question, Helen answered, "Yes, I do. He has done everything he could to annoy Mr. Keith ever since he came to school."

Lizzie's eyes gleamed with satisfaction, as she exclaimed,—“Yes, that's what I think too. He's just as horrid as he can be.”

"Don't say anything to Sepha about it," Helen cautioned in a low tone. "You know she was absent yesterday."

Sepha's greeting was somewhat chilly, for she never spoke to Lizzie Pidge if she could help it. She dropped behind with her little sister, but Helen turned and said,—

"Come along, Sepha. I want to talk to you."

So Sepha walked along beside her, while Lizzie drew closer and leaned more heavily on Helen's arm, as she said,—

"I cut you out yesterday, Sepha, I sat with Helen."

"Only part of the time," Helen added quickly.

Sepha looked annoyed. She did not like that any one should occupy her seat, especially when that seat was next Helen.

"Please, Lizzie, don't lean quite so hard—you tire me," Helen said, drawing away from the other girl.

At that Lizzie snatched her arm away with an offended air and marched on in silence by herself. To Helen's further remarks she returned such short answers that, after a little the girl left her to herself, and talked only to Sepha.

The next day was Friday, and Helen was kept at home by a sick-headache. She saw Lizzie Pidge go by on her way home, and smiled as she said to herself,—“I wonder if she sat with Sepha to-day?” But she did not think it probable, knowing how Sepha disliked Lizzie and how little pains she took to conceal her feeling.

But Helen did not yet know Lizzie Pidge. All through the winter the girl had tried to worm herself into Helen's confidence and win her friendship. The indifference and coldness with which her advances were received had seemingly had

no effect upon her until that Thursday when she walked to school with her and Sepha. Then the expression of dislike, almost of loathing, with which Helen drew away from her, had suddenly and completely changed her feeling towards the latter, into a cold bitter enmity.

"She thinks I'm not good enough to be her friend," Lizzie said to herself then, "maybe she'll find that I'm good enough to be her enemy. She and her Sepha, indeed!"

She did not go near either of the girls again that day, but her thoughts were busy, and the glances that she cast at them were full of evil purpose.

When Helen saw her pass up the road on Friday night, Lizzie was thinking of her and the smile that touched her lips was not good to see.

On Monday morning, Sepha was nowhere in sight when Helen came long, and Sarah Barnes informed the girl that, "Sepha 'n' Patty—they went off to school quite some time ago."

"But it isn't late, I wonder why they didn't wait for me," Helen said.

"I'd know," Sarah Barnes answered indifferently, "she was in a dretful hurry to get off—Sepha was."

Helen turned away and walked rapidly on. It was the first time that Sepha had gone on without her. She remembered that one morning, when

she had been detained at home, Sepha had waited, though it was so late that they had had to run almost all the way to school.

"She must have wanted to see Mr. Keith for something before school," was the conclusion which Helen reached at last.

When she entered the schoolroom, Sepha was in her seat, her head bent over a book. It was still early and not many of the scholars were in their places. Helen smiled at Patty as she went past to her seat.

"Why, Sepha, what made you hurry off so? I stopped for you," she said, laying her hand in friendly fashion on the other's shoulder.

But Sepha twisted her shoulder impatiently away, and not looking up at all answered coldly,—

"I couldn't wait this morning."

Helen gazed at her for a second in mute surprise. She thought she had seen Sepha in all sorts of moods, but never before had she met coldness and unfriendliness in her. She turned away deeply hurt and angry too, for she felt that, whatever might be the matter, Sepha had no reason to treat her like this. She too, opened a book, but she could not have told what book it was, as she sat gazing with unseeing eyes at the page.

Then, as she recalled Sepha's unchanging friendliness up to this time, and remembered her hard, lonely home-life, her anger died, and only the hurt

remained. She turned and slipped her arm about her friend's waist, and whispered softly,—

“What is it, Sepha dear? Tell me what is the matter.”

Sepha turned and looked at her then, and the glance of the blue eyes seemed to cut like steel, so cold and hard it was. She did not say one word, but deliberately pushed Helen's arm away, and turned again to her book.

A hot, indignant color flushed Helen's cheeks then, and she too turned proudly away and did not look at Sepha or speak to her again that day.

And poor proud little Sepha with her aching heart, sat in her seat all through the noon intermission, straining her ears to catch every word that Helen uttered as she talked with a group of the older girls on the other side of the room. Her heart ached so that suddenly she found her eyes dim with tears. She dashed them angrily away and taking a note from her pocket read it again and again. As she read, a proud anger burned afresh in her heart, and quickly dried the tears in her eyes.

And Lizzie Pidge darted sly glances from one to the other of the shadowed faces, and laughed silently to herself.

Sepha and Patty hurried off by themselves as soon as school was over, and Helen walked home with some of the other girls. These other girls were all wondering what had happened to inter-

rupt the friendship between her and Sepha, for the two had always gone back and forth together since Helen came, but, though the latter was pleasant and friendly with them all, she was not a girl whom they could question on such a subject, and their curiosity remained unsatisfied.

But Helen was very unhappy over the affair. All that evening she kept thinking of it, and she lay awake for an hour or two after she went to bed, grieving over it, and really grieving quite as much for Sepha's own sake as for herself.

"For Sepha is so lonely," she thought. "She has nobody at all to really care for her except dear little Patty. I'm sure there is some mistake or misunderstanding under it all, and I do wish Sepha would talk it over with me. I wonder if Lizzie Pidge can be at the bottom of it. She's such a mischief-maker!"

Before she slept, Helen had made up her mind to put aside pride and anger and make one more attempt to find out what had come between her friend and herself. It meant much for the girl to come to this resolution, for in a different way, she was quite as proud as Sepha herself, and she felt that she could hardly endure another such repulse as she had received that day.

She did not stop for Sepha the next morning, and through the day no word passed between them. Again Sepha and Patty walked home by themselves; but Helen remained at the school

house until all who went her way had gone on. She did not feel like talking to any of them just then.

Sepha was sitting by the window when she saw Helen coming up the path. Patty saw her too, and ran to open the door. She came back saying,—

“Sister—Helen wants you.”

Then Sepha rose and went slowly to the door. She did not ask Helen in, but stood looking coldly at her.

Helen’s face flushed and paled as she saw the proud cold little face and the slender figure standing stiffly before her. But proud and cold though it was there seemed to her something so lonely and sorrowful in the girl’s pale face, that Helen’s warm heart was touched.

“Sepha,” she began, “I want to talk to you—I must.”

“I don’t see why,” was the chilling response.

Patty was clinging to her sister’s dress, and Helen saw Sarah Barnes peering through the open door beyond.

“Please let me see you alone,” she whispered. “I—I’ve felt so bad—Sepha.”

Her voice trembled on the last word, and she bit her lips to keep back the tears. Sepha frowned to keep hers back. Then she tossed her head impatiently.

“Oh well, I don’t see what’s the use,” she said,

“but—come along, if you want to,” and she led the way to her own room.

Patty was following, but Helen stooped and whispered to her. “Wait here till we come downstairs, little Blossom,” and the child obediently ran back to the kitchen.

Sepha’s room, like Helen’s, was in the attic, with two windows looking towards John Ramsay’s house. Helen had never before been up-stairs in the Dunlap house, but she was not thinking of this now. Sepha pushed forward a little old-fashioned rocking-chair for her visitor, but she did not sit down herself. She stood silently and stiffly beside the table, waiting for the other to speak.

Helen began hurriedly,—“Sepha, *do* tell me what makes you so cold and unfriendly to me. What have I done—or what do you think I have done, for *I know* I have done nothing to deserve such—coldness.”

Sepha’s eyes flashed, then suddenly softened and dimmed.

“I thought you were my friend! I—I *loved* you. Helen Dale—you don’t *begin* to know how I loved you!” she cried passionately.

“And don’t you love me now, Sepha—as I do you?” Helen asked as she rose and laid her hands on the other girl’s shoulders.

“No, I don’t! I *hate* a hypocrite!” cried Sepha fiercely.

"Sepha Dunlap, what do you mean?" exclaimed Helen too much amazed for the moment to be angry.

"I mean," cried Sepha, with a little catch in her voice, "that I'd rather you'd have said ten times as bad things about me and my people to my face, then to have seemed so kind and dear—and then to have said things to others behind my back. I *know* that my brother isn't good like yours, and maybe my father *is* a miser, and I—I'm queer and horrid and everything—but if all that and a thousand times more had been true of you—do you think I would have talked to anybody about it? I'd have *died* first!" She stamped her foot angrily on the floor, and the next minute she dropped in a sorrowful little heap beside the chair and buried her face in the cushion, while a storm of tearless sobs shook her.

Helen dropped on the floor beside her and gently lifted the bowed head.

"Sepha," she said quietly, "it is all false—every word of it. Who told you all this?"

Sepha's face was very sorrowful now. All the fiery anger had died out of it.

"I can't tell you," she answered drearily, "I promised I wouldn't tell."

"But you had no right to give such a promise when the matter concerned me as well as you. Sepha—don't you believe me? I tell you I never said any of those things."

Sepha lifted heavy eyes to the other girl's face.

"Didn't you say that my brother got just what he deserved last Thursday?"

Helen hesitated. Swiftly her thoughts flew back to that walk with Lizzie Pidge and her insinuating questions.

"Sepha," she cried, "is Lizzie Pidge at the bottom of this?"

"Lizzie told me—some," Sepha admitted, "and she told me to ask you if you didn't say that about Jack—and you see you can't deny it."

"No, I can't deny that," Helen answered frankly, "but that's the *only* word of truth in all you've accused me of; and you know Sepha, how Jack has troubled Mr. Keith; but all the same I ought not to have said that to Lizzie Pidge, and I knew it the minute I said it and I was sorry then. I'm more sorry now. But that ought not to separate you and me. You believe what I say about the rest, don't you, Sepha?"

The girl was silent. Helen waited a moment, then she stood up with a proud cold look driving the sorrow from her eyes.

"Very well, if you doubt my word," she said, and turned away. She had reached the door when Sepha sprang up and ran after her.

"Helen—Helen—that isn't all!" she cried. "It was *this* that hurt the most of all."

She thrust a note into Helen's hand, and stood watching with eager burning eyes as her friend

read it. Helen's face gathered indignation as she read. The epistle was signed "A Friend," and purported to be written for the purpose of informing Sepha of the true character of her pretended friend, Helen Dale. The writer declared that she had heard Helen say, more than once, that she did not like Sepha at all, and went with her so much simply from pity; because nobody else seemed to care for her, and with that miserly father and that dreadful brother of hers she was almost an object of charity. There were two pages all in this strain, and the sting of it all was that the handwriting was so much like Helen's that poor Sepha—too sore-hearted over it all to judge clearly—had half believed that Helen had written it for the express purpose of breaking off a friendship of which she was weary.

As she read the last words, Helen flung the note on the floor and faced Sepha with such hot anger as her friend had never before seen her show.

"To think that you could believe such things of me, Sepha Dunlap!" she cried indignantly. "How *could* you—how could you for a moment believe it?"

Sepha quailed for an instant before that storm of indignant reproach, then a beautiful sweet light flashed into her eyes.

"Helen, Helen, forgive *me*," she cried, "for

ever doubting you for one moment. I don't see now how I ever could—but, Helen, can't you understand? I've loved you so ever since that first day when I saw you in the barn; and you are so dainty, and so—so different from the other girls, and most of all different from me. I'm not like the others, and none of them care for me, and I've always wondered how you could, and I haven't dared to believe that you really did love me, even a little—and so—and so—”

She broke off with trembling lips, and stood with her eyes hungrily searching Helen's face for a sign of forgiveness.

Then all in a moment the anger and indignation died out of Helen's eyes, and she leaned over and kissed the hot cheek of her friend.

“And so—and so—Sepha Dunlap, for once, was a little goose; but she's never again going to be so foolish; and she's never again going to give a second thought to an anonymous letter. Ugh! Put it in the fire, Sepha, and you and I will be deaf and dumb after this, whenever Lizzie Pidge is anywhere about.”

“You think she wrote that, then?” Sepha asked doubtfully.

“I think she's more likely to have done it than anyone else. At any rate she utterly misrepresented me about the other things. *You* know her way of saying things herself and then repeating them as if others had said them to her. Sepha

Dunlap, I *can't* see how you could let her impose on you so!"

"Neither can I now," Sepha answered humbly, "but I'm so happy that I don't care one bit. May I walk home with you, Helen?"

From the kitchen window, Sarah Barnes looked after the two as they went up the road together.

"Sepha, she's just clear bewitched with that Dale girl," she remarked to herself as she picked up a hairpin that had just slipped from her hair to the molding-board. "*I* don't see anything so wonderful taking about her."

CHAPTER X.

A BIT OF REVENGE.

MAX DALE had thought that he worked hard enough through the fall and winter, but after the first of April, he looked back upon the preceding months as a period of comparative idleness. The farmer had decided that he and Max could do the plowing and planting without other help, and he required of his young assistant fully as much work as if he had been a man grown instead of a boy. Max made no complaint. He was interested in the work and would have enjoyed it had there been less of it, but no boy of barely seventeen can enjoy working day in and day out, from five o'clock in the morning until six at night, with no rest except the brief time spent at meals, and no holidays except Sundays; and even on Sundays there were the "chores" to be done as usual night and morning.

John Ramsay was a good farmer, and that season he pushed his farm work so effectually that his plowing and planting were done earlier than those of any of his neighbors. But oh, how weary Max was before those long furrows were all

turned; and how endless those same furrows seemed to him as he walked up and down—up and down covering the seed that his uncle had sown.

Nor did his labors lessen or lighten as the weeks passed. Plowing and planting had at least been done in the beautiful spring days when the air was fresh and invigorating, and laden with the thousand sweet odors of upturned earth and budding leaves and blooming flowers—but when the corn was ready for hoeing, the potatoes for cultivating, the beans and peas and various other vegetables for weeding—then there were no more refreshing fragrance-laden spring breezes to make even hard labor endurable, but the work must be done under a summer sun that seemed to beat down upon the hill country with double power, because the season was so brief.

School closed the first day of June, but long before that date, all the boys old enough to help on the farms had left.

Helen had gradually taken upon herself the entire charge of the poultry, and with the young broods to care for, in addition to the daily routine work of the farmhouse, she too found scant leisure while daylight lasted.

“I wouldn’t mind the work, though,” she said once to her brother, “if only Uncle John would be pleasant; but lately it seems as if he never opens his lips except to order somebody to do something instantly, or else to find fault with

what has been done. I don't see how Aunt Mary can endure it and be so gentle and patient with him."

"And it's the same about the outside work," Max replied. "I have tried my best, but I never can suit him, and I'm beginning to think it isn't a bit of use to try. I'd clear out to-morrow, if it wasn't for you—and Aunt Mary."

Helen looked at him with a shadow of fear and anxiety in her eyes. It was new for Max to talk in that reckless fashion. She wondered if he were really deteriorating under his uncle's continual fault-finding. Certainly he seemed rougher and harder lately. She sighed as she turned away and went thoughtfully into the house.

The third day of July was intensely hot. Max, as usual was up before light, and had all the chores done before breakfast. As he left the table he said to his uncle,—

"Where do you want me to work to-day?"

"In the potater-patch. The bugs are gettin' too numerous there—you can clear 'em out," was the answer.

Max drew a long breath. If there was one task that he detested above all others, it was "bugging" potato vines, but he said nothing. Going to the tool-house, he got some old tomato cans, and tramped over to the potato patch. It was a big patch. It looked immense to the boy as his glance swept over it, but he set to work without delay.

Hour after hour he picked the little speckled pests from the rough sturdy plants—hour after hour crouching and stooping, with the blazing July sun beating upon his head and back until he felt as if his blood was fairly sizzling in his veins.

When he went in to dinner his face was crimson under its coat of tan, and his eyes red and bloodshot.

"It's dreadfully hot, isn't it, Max," his sister said, looking at him with quick sympathy, as she filled a basin with fresh water for him to bathe his face.

"Yes, the hottest we've had yet, I think," he answered, and there was a tired, hopeless ring to his voice that sent a swift pang to Helen's heart.

"I *wish* you didn't have to go into that potato field again this afternoon," she cried. "Max, I haven't much to do, let me help you so you can get through sooner."

"Think I see myself letting you bug potatoes!" he returned. "Not much, little girl!" But though he refused her help, he smiled down at her, and went in to dinner with a somewhat brighter face.

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning, only it seemed to the boy that it grew hotter instead of cooler as the hours passed; and he was so tired that he could not work as fast as he had done in the morning. He stumbled wearily up and down the long rows of plants, his head throbbing with pain and fatigue, and black specks dancing dizzily before his tired eyes.

"Wish the bugs would eat up every plant and be done with it," he muttered at last. "*I* never want to eat another potato long's I live!" But even the hottest July day does come to an end, and the sun was sinking behind the western hills when Max, stopping for a moment to wipe the perspiration from his face, saw John Ramsay coming towards him. He was stopping here and there to examine the plants.

"Ye ain't thorough 'nough!" he growled as he reached the row where the boy was at work. "Look a here—I found them on some o' the vines you've been over."

He opened his hand and showed three bugs.

Max set his lips angrily as he straightened himself up, and then looked with a sarcastic smile into his uncle's face as he answered,—

"*Three* bugs overlooked in all the rows that I've been over! Uncle John—do you think Tim Barney would have left *only* three bugs?"

"Tim Barney's got nothin' to do with your work," the farmer answered shortly, for he knew as well as Max did that Tim would have been likely to leave ten times as many. "Boys don't amount to much nowadays. Got to watch 'em 'n' foller 'em up, or the work won't be half done. You ought to've finished this whole patch to-day, an' ye ain't more'n three quarters through," he added.

The boy's face darkened, and he crushed a bug in his fingers instead of dropping it into one of

the cans. He longed to kick over the cans and let the hordes he had collected run riot over the vines, while he poured out all the bitterness that had been accumulating in his heart through the past months. But Max was afraid of his own fiery temper. He dared not speak to his uncle while that hot wrath possessed him. He knew that he must wait; and so once again he held down with all the strength of his will the burning words he longed to utter—and bent in silence over the vines.

The farmer stood looking down at him for a moment, then, without saying anything more, he turned and walked off. Max cast a wrathful glance after him.

“Just you wait!” he muttered under his breath, “I can’t stand much more of your nagging, not even for Aunt Mary’s sake. You’re making it too rough a road for me to travel much longer.”

And as he tramped across the field, the farmer was thinking,—

“That boy looked for a minute as if he’d like to knock me down. Maybe I am a leetle too sharp with him, but he’s so high-strung that ’twon’t do to let him get the upper hand o’ things. He’s improvin’ in his work—does ’bout as much as any man I’ve hired. Wish he wouldn’t look at me with them great eyes of his glowin’ like coals of fire, though—makes me feel kinder creepy.

He'll wish he hadn't been so fiery some day when he finds out what I'm a plannin'."

When at last he left the potato field, Max was so tired that he was longer than usual about the milking, and supper was half over when he entered the kitchen. He did not sit down even then, but went up to his room to change his shirt, which was wet with perspiration and soiled by the work he had been doing. The change of garments, after a thorough washing of face and hands, refreshed him, and he took his seat at the table feeling, as he said to himself, "more like a Christian."

It did seem a pity that John Ramsay must be continually picking at him and stirring up his wrath afresh, but so it was. Now the farmer sat, his hands in his pockets and his chair tipped back against the wall, looking with a scornful smile at the boy's freshly brushed hair, and his clean out-going shirt and tie.

"Humph! You're too much of a fine gentleman for a farmer's boy!" he remarked dryly.

Max made no reply but his brows met for an instant in a frown. The farmer continued, "I always s'posed 'twas girls that did the prinking, not farm boys."

Then Max flung down his knife angrily. "I've washed my face and hands and brushed my hair and put on a clean shirt—if you call that prinking!" he cried stormily. "Farm-boy or not, I

hope I shall always be enough of a gentleman to come to the table clean when I can."

The farmer glanced at his own soiled garments and his face grew dark. "You better look out, young man! You're gettin' too fine for plain folks like me!" he exclaimed hastily, and rising he walked heavily out to the porch and sat down there, leaving the boy with an angry flush on his face; while Mrs. Ramsay washed the dishes with trembling fingers, and Helen wiped them with her face almost as set and stern as her brother's.

"Oh, why will he—why *will* he, be all the time stirring up that boy!" Mrs. Ramsay said to herself. "Seems as if he just *likes* to say tormenting things to him."

Later in the evening a neighbor joined the farmer on the porch. As Max was passing, the neighbor called out to him,—

"S'pose you're goin' over to Herndon to-morrow with all the rest of the young folks, ain't ye?"

Before the boy could answer, his uncle inquired what was going on at Herndon.

"Why—didn't you know? They're goin' to celebrate the Fourth over there with an oration, an' music, an' fireworks, an' great doings generally. My boys have been talkin' about it for a week past," the man replied.

Max had talked about it, but only to his sister; but he too had been thinking about the Herndon

celebration for days past. He longed to get away for a few hours from the monotonous round of work—to be a boy among boys once more if only for a day. He had meant to ask his uncle that evening if he and Helen could go, but after what had happened at the supper-table, Max felt that he would rather never go anywhere than to ask a favor of John Ramsay.

But Helen had heard the neighbor's question to her brother, and she had seen the longing look in Max's eyes. When the men had gone, she came out to the porch, and taking her courage in both hands, she said,—

“Uncle John, are you willing that Max and I should take old Pete and go to Herndon to-morrow?”

The farmer had lighted his pipe. He puffed once or twice in silence, then he answered gruffly, “Seems to me it's all foolishness to waste a whole day when the farm work's drivin' so, but,—I s'pose you can go 'f you want to so much.”

“Oh, thank you, Uncle John,” the girl said as heartily as she could, considering the grudging way in which the permission had been given. She ran into the kitchen, stopped to whisper to her aunt, “We're going to Herndon to-morrow—Max and I. Uncle John says we may,” and then ran happily up to her brother's room.

“Max, Max, we can go to Herndon to-morrow!” she cried joyfully. “*Won't* it be lovely

to be off together for a whole day—just you and I!”

But to her surprise the boy's face did not brighten at her news, and her own lost its happy radiance as he answered dully,—

“I'm sorry—on your account, Nellie—but we can't go.”

“Can't go? Why yes we can, Max. I asked Uncle John myself, and he said we could take old Pete and go.”

“That's all right enough, but, Helen, you don't think how it would be. All the young folks will be there, and they'll all be buying candy and ice-cream and things—and getting tickets for all the doings—and if we should go what kind of a time would we have with not a single cent to spend for anything?”

By the time he ceased speaking, Helen's face was as sober as his own. “Oh, dear, I never once thought of that,” she replied. Then she looked at him doubtfully: “There's that gold piece, you know,” she ventured wistfully. “I've never meant to keep it, when you've no money for yourself.”

“Pshaw!” he returned impatiently. “As if I'd take back the little I gave you Christmas! Besides,” he added, and his eyes too grew somber, “we may need that ten dollars pretty badly before long. I don't feel that we can use it except for something absolutely necessary. No, Nellie

—we can't go and that's all there is about it. How does he expect we can go anywhere without a cent of money?" he ended angrily.

Helen was bitterly disappointed—not so much for herself, though she too would have liked the brief change and outing—but she realized how greatly her brother needed it. His life here was so much harder than hers—for, though her uncle was stern and gruff with her as he was with everybody, not excepting his wife, yet he did not find fault with her as he did with Max, or say such aggravating things about whatever she did. She grieved long that night over her brother's hard life, looking forward with dread to the future; for she felt that Max's patience and endurance were nearly exhausted, and she could not wonder at it.

When she went down-stairs in the morning she found Mrs. Ramsay hurrying about the kitchen, baking cake and tarts and chicken patties.

"For I want you and Max to have a real nice lunch to carry," she said to the girl, her faded eyes brightening in the thought of pleasure to come to her two "children." But the brightness died away as Helen said, in a low tone,—

"It was so good of you to do this for us, auntie, but—we are not going after all."

"Why—he hasn't—your uncle hasn't changed his mind, has he?" the little woman inquired hastily.

Helen turned her face away as she answered sorrowfully,—“No, but there’s another reason. Don’t ask me any more, please, auntie. We just can’t go, and that’s all there is about it.”

Mrs. Ramsay asked no more questions, but her face was as grave as the girl’s all through breakfast, and her thoughts were busy.

Helen was skimming the pans of milk in the pantry a little later, when her aunt came up behind her and tucked a dollar bill into her hand.

“There, dear,” she said quietly, “I guess you can go now, can’t you?”

Helen dropped her skimmer and turned with a flushed face, crying out, “Auntie, auntie! we can’t take your money—the little money that you have—not half what you need yourself!”

She tried to slip the bill back into her aunt’s hand, but Mrs. Ramsay would not take it. Her face was bright now, almost joyous, as she saw that her guess had been a correct one.

“Listen, dear,” she said eagerly. “I don’t have much money, but then I don’t need much; and don’t you *know* that nothing I could buy with that dollar would give me one half the pleasure that I shall have in thinking of you and Max enjoying yourselves with the rest of the young folks? You wouldn’t hurt me, Helen, by refusing what I give so freely, would you?”

“No, I can’t refuse when you put it so,” the girl answered after a moment’s hesitation; then

she laid her fresh young cheek against the woman's thin worn one. "But, auntie," she added with a wistful loving look, "are *you* never to have any good times, yourself?"

"It's good times enough for me to have you and Max to love and plan for," was the quick response. "Now run and tell him, and get ready, for it's a long drive to Herndon, and I want you to get off early."

"But couldn't you go with us, auntie?" the girl urged. "I *wish* you would."

"No, no!" was the hurried answer. "Your uncle never goes to any such doin's nowadays, an' I couldn't think of going without him. Run right along, child."

Stopping only to drop a swift light kiss first on one cheek and then on the other of the face looking so lovingly at her, Helen hurried to the barn where her brother was at work.

"We *can* go, Max—look here!" she cried with a gay little dancing step as she flourished the bill before his face.

He looked at it and then gazed wonderingly at her. "You don't mean to say that Uncle John gave it to you?" he cried breathlessly.

"Not Uncle John—but that blessed little wife that is a thousand times too good for him!" Helen answered. "Now hurry up, Max, so we *can* get off early."

But the boy's face was somber again as he

turned once more to his work. "As if I'd go pleasuring with *her* money!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"But, Max," his sister pleaded, "don't you understand? She says nothing she could buy with it would give her half so much pleasure as for us to use it. I know she'll feel dreadfully if you refuse it."

Max raked on doggedly with that determined set to his lips that Helen was learning to dread. Suddenly she dropped down on the hay and began to sob.

"Oh, hush, Helen—don't do that!" her brother cried, throwing down his rake and bending over her. "Look here! If you'll stop, I'll go," he added desperately.

She looked up then with a smile breaking through a mist of tears.

"You dear boy!" she exclaimed wiping her eyes, "I felt as if I just couldn't *bear* it if you stayed and worked in that potato patch to-day. Now hurry, please. I'll lay out your clothes all ready for you," and springing up she hurried into the house.

Within an hour the two were driving down the "pike" in the wake of numerous other vehicles, most of them loaded with young people, though there were many older ones among the number.

Once away from hard work and harder fault-finding, Max banished all unpleasant thoughts and

gave himself up to the enjoyment of whatever the day might hold for him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed stretching out his arms with a long glad breath, "it does seem mighty good to be a boy once more, instead of a farm hand, even if I do have to wear a suit a mile too small for me." He tugged his sleeves as he spoke, and glanced uneasily at his trousers which were too short by a couple of inches.

"Never mind clothes—we won't think about them to-day," his sister replied with a swift glance at the bottom of her dress where the ruffles had been lowered to lengthen the skirt. "Let's forget everything disagreeable, and enjoy every minute of the time."

"So we will," Max answered; and in this spirit they found pleasure everywhere.

The orator of the day was to speak in a great tent that had been put up in the middle of the town, and having fastened old Pete securely in a shady place among many other teams, Max and his sister found seats where they could see and hear all that went on. They saw many familiar faces in the gathering crowd.

"There's Sepha over there with the Browns," Max said, and Helen looked across and nodded to the girl.

"I'm so glad they brought her," she said. "Mrs. Brown is always nice to Sepha."

"If there isn't Tim Barney!" Max exclaimed

a moment later. "Thought he'd left this part of the country."

"Oh no, I heard somebody say he was working for Mr. Gross. He looks as foxey as ever, doesn't he!" laughed Helen.

When the exercises of the morning were over, the brother and sister joined several of their acquaintance who, like themselves, had brought their lunches, and they all picnicked together in a shady corner of the common—as others were doing all about. Helen looked for Sepha, but she had disappeared in the moving crowd.

In the afternoon there was to be a patriotic concert in the big tent, and both Helen and Max wanted to attend it. They had spent about half their money for soda and ice-cream and a box of candy which Helen had bought for her aunt.

"Our tickets will take the rest of the money," Max said, "but I think we'll get as much for it at the concert as we could any other way."

"I think so too," assented the girl.

"You wait here then till I get the tickets," her brother added, and hurried off.

"They won't let anybody in till half-past two," he said as he rejoined her with the bits of blue pasteboard in his hand, "because there are no reserved seats. It's ten minutes past now, and we'd better get up as near the entrance as we can, so as to get in among the first."

So they edged their way slowly through the gathering throng until they could go no farther.

"Oh, there's Sepha!" Helen cried. "She's alone too. I'm going to call her over here."

She waited until she caught the girl's eye and then beckoned to her. Sepha shook her head at first, but when her friend gave a second and more imperative summons she began to slip quietly through the crowd, and presently joined the two.

"You were alone, weren't you?" Helen asked.

"Yes."

"Well, then, why didn't you come over without waiting for me to call you twice?"

"Oh, because," was Sepha's vague response.

"I know, Sepha Dunlap—you wouldn't come because Max was with me," whispered Helen. "You little goosie! As if he'd mind!" she added, giving Sepha a half-impatient but altogether friendly little shake.

"Of *course* he'd rather not have me hanging 'round," Sepha answered with the proud lift of the head that Helen had come to know so well.

Before she could answer, her brother glanced around and said in a low tone, "There's Foxey Barney sitting on a barrel close to the tent. Don't look that way, Helen."

"I'm sure I've no desire to," she replied, turning her eyes in the opposite direction. "I hope he won't see us."

But he had already seen them, and as his eyes

rested on Max a fiery gleam flashed for an instant in their reddish depths, and a vindictive smile curved the mouth under the sandy mustache.

Presently he gave a loud, coarse laugh that attracted the attention of those about him, and then he leaned over and shouted,—

“Hey, Max—have ye forgot your old friends? My! But you’ve ben a-growin’, ain’t ye! Ye look like a locust in his last year’s skin. Shake hands boy—shake hands,” and he stretched out a freckled, hairy paw above the intervening heads.

All eyes were turned upon Max, who colored to the roots of his hair with mortification, and ground his teeth with futile anger. He did so long to dash his clenched fist into the insolent, grinning, freckled face! But before he could open his lips a big fellow standing by suddenly kicked the barrel on which Barney was perched, flinging him head-foremost into the closely-packed crowd. His head butted into Max, who would most certainly have given it a hearty punch if his hands had not at that instant been grasping Helen to keep her from being thrown down. Sepha slipped and went partly down, but recovered her footing immediately, and when Max turned, after seeing that both girls were unhurt, Tim had disappeared.

“Isn’t he *horrid*—that Tim Barney!” Helen whispered indignantly to Sepha, then she added hastily,—“Why—what’s the matter? You aren’t

hurt, are you?" for the girl's face was full of trouble and her lips were trembling.

"My ticket's gone," she half sobbed. "Oh, Helen, isn't it too bad! Mrs. Brown gave it to me, and I did so want to hear the concert with you."

"Did you drop it when you fell?" asked Helen. "Maybe it's under our feet;" and she pulled aside her dress and searched as well as she could for the press. But there was no blue slip visible, and she turned to her brother and told him of Sepha's loss.

"What shall we do?" she whispered. "If she'd only take my ticket,—but I know nothing would induce her to."

Max cast a quick glance at Sepha's disappointed face, then he peered down at the ground.

"Here's your ticket, Sepha," he announced the next moment, as he stooped and picked up one from beneath his feet.

"Oh, how glad I am. Thank you," the girl cried, her face radiant with relief and delight, as she took the bit of cardboard he held out to her.

But Helen's eyes were quick; moreover she knew her brother better than Sepha did. She had seen him pick up the ticket, but she had also seen him drop it there first, and she looked at him now with mingled pride in his ready self-sacrifice, and disappointment that he should lose the concert himself.

"Max, dear—*I wish* you could take my ticket," she whispered.

"That's all right!" he answered in the same tone. "Don't let her suspect, for it would spoil it all for her. I'll wait for you at the door when it's over."

He kept his place by them until the crowd began to surge into the tent, then, just as the two girls passed in he said hurriedly to his sister so that Sepha would hear,—

"There's a fellow over here that I want to catch. I'll see you when the concert's over," and, lifting his cap, he disappeared.

"Oh!" cried Sepha, "I'm sorry, Helen, wouldn't he have stayed if I hadn't been with you?"

"The idea! He wanted you to come with me—I know he did," Helen answered quickly. It was well that Sepha did not guess what reason her friend had to speak so positively.

Max stayed without, and really, as he said afterwards, heard almost as well as if he had been inside the tent, but he did not see the fellow that he wanted to catch—and for a very good reason. That fellow with his freckled face and foxey eyes was occupying one of the best seats in the tent, and chuckling to himself over the "neat" way in which he had snatched the blue ticket of admittance as it slipped from Sepha's hand in the crowd.

"Maybe she's forgot that affair at John Ramsay's apple-bee last fall, but I ain't forgot it," he said to himself, "on'y this don't begin to pay her off for that."

But he took good care to keep out of Max Dale's way when the concert was over.

When Max drove his sister home they were both tired, but it was a restful tired after all, for they had enjoyed the rare outing so much.

"I hope Uncle John won't be cross to-night," Helen said as they came in sight of the house.

And for once he was not. He was sitting on the porch, discussing with his wife a matter of such interest that he even failed to notice how wearily old Pete's head was drooping as he turned into the yard.

CHAPTER XI.

SUMMER BOARDERS.

MAX was in his room the next evening when his sister ran lightly up the stairs. "I've some news," she cried, "you'd never guess it in the world, Max."

"Then I won't wear out my brains trying to," was his indifferent response.

"Oh, very well, then, if you don't care to know, I won't wear out my tongue telling you," she retorted, turning away.

"Come back!" he called. "Of course I want to know all about it. I'm dying to hear, as you girls say."

"You know very well that I can't enjoy even a piece of news unless I share it with you," she answered affectionately, as she came back and sat down. "It's—summer boarders."

"Summer boarders? What in the world do you mean, Helen?" the boy inquired wonderingly.

"I mean, that we're going to have some summer boarders—*here*," she declared.

"Here?" he echoed but in a very different tone.

"Well, I certainly am surprised. I would never have believed that Uncle John would consent to that."

"It's Aunt Mary that has done the 'consenting,' and Uncle John that wants the boarders to come," Helen returned. "You know they've had a houseful of city people at the Mallorys' this summer, and now some more want to come and they've no room for them; so Mr. Mallory was over last evening to ask if they could come here—and they're coming."

"I wouldn't have believed it," Max repeated thoughtfully. "I can't imagine what induced Uncle John to let them come."

"Money, perhaps. They're to pay seven dollars a week each," suggested the girl.

But Max shook his head. "I thought he cared more for his independence than for money. He must make a good living off the farm, and I know there's no mortgage or anything of that sort, for I've heard him say, more than once, that he owed no man a dollar."

"Well, I don't know anything about that, only they're coming—next Saturday—and they're to have this big front chamber next us."

"Botheration!" exclaimed Max with a frown, "Then I'll be running into them every time I come up to my room."

"That will be a bother, but of course there's no other room that they could have."

"It means lots of extra work for Aunt Mary and you, Helen," Max added thoughtfully.

"Yes, I know that. I shall try to save auntie all the steps that I can."

"Do you know who they are?"

"The boarders? They are Boston people—a Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley. That's all I know about them," Helen answered. "There!" she added, "I forgot to shut up those chickens," and she hurried downstairs.

Between that and Saturday Mrs. Ramsay and Helen were even more busy than usual, for the seldom-used parlor and sitting-room must be swept and dusted and fresh curtains put up; the big front chamber, too, although as spotless and orderly as all the rest of Mrs. Ramsay's domain, must be "gone over" afresh before the careful housewife considered it ready for the coming of the strangers. It was arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley should have their meals by themselves in the sitting-room where Helen should wait on their table, while the farmer and his family were to eat in the kitchen as usual.

As the day drew near, Helen began to dread the coming of these strangers. Somehow she felt as if it would break up the pleasant relations between her aunt and herself. Even now, she fancied that there was a difference—that Mrs. Ramsay was much less tender and affectionate to her than she had been. She tried to persuade

herself that she was mistaken—or that, if there was a difference, it was only because her aunt was tired out with the extra work, and worried over the coming of strangers into her household. Helen had tried in every way that she could think of to save her aunt's strength, and to do, herself, as much as possible of the extra work. But Mrs. Ramsay often refused her offered help, and refused it, too, without the tender smile or affectionate words she had before lavished so freely upon the girl. Several times she had answered coldly, and with a most unusual decision had repulsed the affectionate little touches and caresses that she had seemed to love before. Helen was sorely puzzled and grieved over it, but she kept her perplexity to herself. Not even to Max would she speak of it lest it turn the quick-tempered boy against his aunt, as he had already turned against his uncle.

Mr. Kingsley proved to be an elderly man taking a vacation to please his wife. He received three or four city papers every day and spent his time poring over them or dozing on the piazza, and wishing himself back in his city office. His wife had come to the country to try to recruit her exhausted energies after a gay winter in society, and her time was spent over fancy work or the lightest kind of light literature.

But they were not troublesome boarders as summer boarders go. They found no fault with their room or their table. Indeed, Mr. Kingsley

declared that Mrs. Ramsay's cooking suited him much better than that of his city cook, and certainly he could find no fault with the quiet, deft-handed little maid who waited upon the table so carefully.

But as the July days slipped away, the face of that little maid grew more and more sober, and a wistful shadow deepened in the blue eyes that had been so full of happy light.

It was not because of the work—though Helen had never in her life before worked so hard. It really seemed strange to her that the addition of but two to the household should have so greatly increased the labor; but now there were two tables to cook for, and for the small one in the sitting-room daintier fare was required than for the farmer's table in the kitchen. The invigorating mountain air, too, awakened famous appetites for the fresh sweet country viands, and so Mrs. Ramsay spent much of her time over the cooking stove, and the working and the printing of the butter fell to Helen, Max doing the churning for her.

Then the washing was very heavy, and the farmer's wife had that to do, for there was no help to be had. The only two women in the neighborhood who did such work for others than their own households had their hands full with the fine washing for summer boarders who paid high prices for the work. So Mrs. Ramsay had to do a second

washing of tablecloths and napkins and towels every week, and though she tried to do all the ironing herself—some of that too fell upon Helen.

But though she went to bed night after night as soon as the supper dishes were washed and put away—too tired even to sit up and talk with her brother—it was not the work that shadowed the girl's face and gave the sorrowful droop to her mouth.

"I could work twice as hard if auntie would look at me and speak to me as she used to," she would say to herself sorrowfully, and her eyes would rest wistfully upon the grave face of the farmer's wife; very grave it was and sometimes touched with a sternness that had never been there before. John Ramsay furtively watched the two, and what he read in their faces seemed to afford him infinite satisfaction. Helen noticed that he spoke much less roughly to his wife in these days, and for that, at any rate, she was glad.

One morning, toward the last of July, the farmer called to Max from the tool-house door. "Get the wheelbarrow and bring it here," he said, and when the boy obeyed, added, "All the stuff in here has got to be carried to the barn chamber. Now work smart, for there's other work waitin' for you and me too."

The tool-house was the first dwelling-house that had been built on the farm. It was very old, but still in good condition, and contained two rooms

and a pantry. The walls were plastered, the woodwork unpainted, and there was an open fireplace in each room.

The boy wondered much what was to be done with the building, but he never once thought of asking his uncle. Indeed, he had fallen into a habit of silence of late, and never spoke to the farmer unless it was absolutely necessary.

When the tools and various odds and ends had all been removed, John Ramsay told the boy to get a broom and sweep the rooms, and then go to work in the corn-field. He himself harnessed old Pete into the open buggy, and drove off, and Max saw with surprise that Helen sat on the seat beside him.

Helen explained the matter to him the next evening.

"Aunt Mary asked me to go to Herndon with Uncle John to help him select some cot-beds and washstands and a few other things for the new boarders that are coming next week. Yes," in response to her brother's look of surprise, "the Kingsleys have a son, and they like it here so much that they've sent for him and a chum of his, and Uncle John is going to fix up the tool-house for them. It will be a real comfortable place. Mrs. Kingsley says that the boys have been camping out in the Adirondacks in a tent, so they won't mind roughing it a little. Come and see the place, Max."

He followed her silently to the tool-house. The floors had been scrubbed and covered with checked matting. A width of the same matting around the walls made a neat, dado-like finish and covered the broken places in the plastering. Curtains of scrim hung at the windows, and for furniture, there were two cot-beds, made up with the freshest of linen and white counterpanes—neat oak washstands with white toilet sets, and in the larger of the two rooms, a round table with a fresh cover and a reading-lamp. Two or three chairs completed the furnishings. With wood fires laid ready to light in the open fireplaces on a chilly evening or a rainy day—the small building made cosy quarters by no means to be despised.

The boy's eyes brightened as he looked through the rooms. He was thinking how he would enjoy occupying them with one or two of his old Springfield schoolmates for company.

"Do you know anything about these fellows that are coming?" he asked in an interested tone.

"Not much. I just heard Mrs. Kingsley talking to auntie yesterday. Her son—Ned she called him—is sixteen, and his chum, Harvey Slade, is a year or two older. They go to some private school near Boston, I believe."

"How long are they going to stay?"

"Through August, I believe," answered Helen.

Max felt an interest that surprised himself in these boys who were coming. He told himself

that he was a fool; that he would never have a minute to spend with them, even if they were "the right sort"; but all the same he found his thoughts continually returning to them.

He happened to be carrying his full milk-pails to the kitchen just as his uncle drove into the yard with the two lads, a day or two later. Max gazed at the strangers so eagerly that he nearly fell over the big yellow barn cat, Peleg, and slopped over a quart or two of milk.

"What ye 'bout there? Why don't ye look an' see where you're goin'!" shouted the farmer sharply. The two boys stared, and one of them snickered. Even in his angry confusion, Max noticed that the other boy did not laugh, and felt a thrill of gratitude towards him therefor. He did not feel any gratitude towards his uncle at that moment.

For several days after this he saw nothing of the two boys, save as he caught a glimpse of them now and then while attending to his duties about the barn or the woodpile. The extra cooking meant more wood for him to cut and carry into the kitchen. He fell into the habit of always stopping and getting an armful whenever he passed the pile.

Once he went out to the barn after supper and, sitting on the doorsill in the soft darkness of the summer evening, looked across to the tool-house. The boys had their lamp burning, and

through the open window he could see Ned Kingsley stretched out lazily on his bed, while Harvey Slade sat by the table, which was strewn with books and papers.

The two were talking and laughing, and the other boy, looking and listening hungrily in the darkness without, felt as if he were looking back on his own past life—on the days when he too had been a happy, care-free schoolboy, ready to see “fun” in anything that happened.

After a while he forgot to listen to the merry talk between the boys as his thoughts lingered on those past days, until he suddenly became aware that his cheeks were wet. He dashed his hand angrily across them.

“Didn’t think I was such a baby!” he said to himself scornfully, and without another glance into that bright room, he turned his back on it and went moodily up to bed.

As he pulled off his shirt it got twisted somehow across his shoulders; for the shoulders had been widening, and the old outing shirt was too small now. He gave it an impatient twitch that tore one of the sleeves almost out. For an instant he looked at it in dismayed silence; then with a sudden fierce jerk, he pulled the hanging sleeve out entirely, and flung it on the floor.

“There!” he exclaimed, “maybe that will be an object lesson for Uncle John to-morrow.”

When he sat down to the breakfast-table the

next morning he kept on his old coat though the morning was very hot and sultry, but when he went to his work in the field, he threw off the jacket and worked with the torn rags fluttering about his bare arm. John Ramsay could not help noticing it.

"Looks 's if you needed some new shirts," he remarked.

"Think so?" returned the boy grimly. "There's one sleeve left to this yet."

His uncle eyed him keenly, noting, for the first time, the short worn trousers and broken shoes, but he said no more on the subject.

The next day, however, he drove over to Herndon, and, when he came back, handed a large bundle to the boy.

"There!" he said in a tone of satisfaction, "I don't want ye goin' ragged. 'F I don't see when ye need clothes, I should think ye might say what ye want."

"I'd go without any—first!" The boy threw back the words in a tone of bitter determination. "I think I earn my board and clothes, anyhow," he added.

His bitter tone angered the farmer. He had gone to Herndon at considerable inconvenience that day, and for the express purpose of getting what he thought the boy ought to have, and he considered that Max owed him some gratitude.

But when, in his own room, Max opened the

bundle he did not feel that he owed any gratitude at all for the contents. His face burned and his eyes were full of angry fire as he took up the garments one by one and looked at them.

There were three shirts of brown and white check gingham, coarse and thick, two pair of blue denim overalls, and a pair of heavy cowhide shoes. With his lips set in a hard line the boy tried on the garments. John Ramsay had bought the same kind and quality that he bought for himself, and he had also bought the same size as for himself. The shirts, therefore, were much too large for Max and hung on him in a loose baggy fashion that fretted him even more than did the coarse rough feeling of the cloth. And the shoes! He fairly groaned as he walked across the floor in the clumsy, ill-fitting things.

"I'd rather, a thousand times, wear my old rags?" he cried passionately, as he pulled off the shoes and relieved his feelings by kicking the objectionable foot-gear under the bed.

However, it was a choice of two evils. He must wear what his uncle had bought or go barefoot and in rags; so the next morning he put on the new things. His aunt cast a disturbed look at him as he entered the kitchen, and as for Helen she gave one glance, and then ran up to her room and had a brief hearty cry that cleared the atmosphere a little for her. The farmer, however, looked approvingly at the boy, and said to him-

self, "Dressed, 'cordin' to his work now—as he ought to be."

Max had never been accustomed to give much thought to what he wore. Until now, he had always been well and suitably dressed and that's all there was about it; but in these garments he felt so ill at ease that he could not bear to have any one see him. It required all the resolution he could muster to walk from the barn to the house when the boarders were sitting on the porch. But they never suspected any such feeling. As he stalked along with his dark unsmiling eyes looking neither to the right nor left, they thought him merely a rather unpleasant-looking country boy, and paid no further attention to him.

But when Ned Kingsley and Harvey Slade had been for about two weeks occupying "the Den"—as they had called the old tool-house—there came a cold storm that lasted for three days. The boys managed to get through the first day fairly well, but on the second, their resources were exhausted, and they did not know what to do with themselves.

Harvey was standing at the window, his hands in his pockets and a bored expression on his face, when he saw Max standing in the barn doorway. He turned to his chum and exclaimed,

"It's deadly dull here and I've read till I don't want to look at a book again for a month. Let's go over to the barn and see if we can get

anything out of that high and mighty Ramsay chap."

"Oh, he's no good. He's mum as an oyster," returned Ned lazily.

"Well, come on anyhow! I'm tired of this den and I want to talk to somebody," replied Harvey, picking up his cap.

"S'pose I'm nobody, then," said Ned in a huffy tone.

"Oh, you're all right, only variety's the spice of life, you know. Come along!" and Harvey went scudding through the rain to the barn.

Ned followed him, though rather unwillingly. Max for once was idle. He was standing in the doorway looking thoughtfully out into the wet barnyard. He turned hastily away as he saw the boys coming through the rain; but Harvey was in a friendly mood and was not to be repulsed.

"Horrid weather, isn't it," he began. "Ned and I got tired of our own company and thought we'd impose ourselves on you for a while. Come along over on the hay!" and without waiting for a response, he went across the big barn floor and flung himself down on the fragrant springy mass.

Ned lounged along after him, his hands in his pockets, and an expression half bored and half vexed, on his face. Max hesitated, but when Harvey again called out to him, "Come on," he followed slowly, a painful consciousness of the

difference between his appearance and that of these other boys, bringing a hot glow to his cheek. But Harvey was one of those boys who are never at a loss for something to say, and he began at once with a sort of friendly curiosity.

"I've been wanting to have a talk with you, but you seem to be always busy. Do you like it—farm work?"

"Some of it I like," Max answered rather stiffly. He could not be friendly all in a moment, as this boy seemed to expect him to be.

"Well, I should think you had altogether too much of a good thing. Your father doesn't give you any playtime, does he?"

"My father—" Max began in a low tone, then he broke off abruptly. "Mr. Ramsay is not my father. His wife is my aunt," he said.

"Oh, that so?" returned Harvey in a surprised tone. "Well, you don't look much like him—that's a fact. Then your name isn't Ramsay?"

"My name is Max—Malcolm Dale."

"What!" exclaimed Harvey starting up with a look of eager interest, "Max Dale? I say—how long have you been here? Did you ever live in Springfield?" He tumbled the questions out in a headlong fashion, his eyes studying the other boy's face impatiently.

"I lived in Springfield until last September," Max answered, his eyes full of wonder.

"And did you happen to know a fellow there

named Theo Harding?" pursued Harvey, breathlessly.

A light flashed into Max's eyes then, and his face also kindled into quick eager interest.

"Know Theo Harding? Well I should say! He was my chum—and one of the dearest fellows that ever lived!" he cried, with a little choking in his throat.

"Right you are!" shouted Harvey springing up and holding out his hand. "He's my cousin, and he's told me no end of yarns about the good times you and he had together in the Springfield high-school. He thinks you're just about right, you know."

"That's what I think about him," Max answered, his voice a little husky. Not even Helen knew how sorely he had missed Theo Harding through these past months. Helen had Sepha to make up in some degree for the friends she had left behind. He had had no one to make up to him.

But Harvey gave him no time now for memories. "Well, if this isn't queer! To think that I've been here two weeks and have seen you almost every day and never guessed who you were! Sit down here and talk a blue streak now. I want to hear all about those school frolics and the prizes and everything. You took a prize didn't you—last year?"

Max flung himself down on the hay then, and in response to Harvey's eager interested questions

told about those happy high-school days in which Theo Harding had had so large a share. Ned Kingsley listened to it all, but he asked no questions. He did not know Theo Harding, and so he lay there idly chewing a bit of hay, and taking silent note of this farm boy's uncouth garments. But in spite of himself, he couldn't help being interested in some of the school episodes that Max narrated so vividly, and he as well as Harvey was surprised when the summons to dinner told them that the morning was gone.

"I say—I've enjoyed our confab immensely," Harvey said heartily as he sprang up to answer the summons. "I shall have to write Theo all about it—and see here now, you're not to draw into your shell and freeze me out after this as you've been doing—just you mind that!" and with a merry good-by he ran through the rain after his cousin, leaving Max feeling like another boy altogether. But the next minute Harvey was back again. "Remember—the calls of great potentates must always be returned the same day. he called out laughingly. "We shall expect you at the Den this evening," and he disappeared without waiting for an answer.

"You may expect me, but whether I'll be there or not is a question," Max said to himself as he stood looking after him. "Slade's a nice fellow though, and he thinks a lot of Theo—but that Kingsley chap's a chump"

Nevertheless when, after supper, he sat alone in his dark room and looking out of his window saw the light from the Den windows shining through the rain, he felt a strong desire to go there and spend another hour in Harvey Slade's company. Helen was still busy downstairs and would not be up for a long time—and he was so lonely there by himself. Then he thought of Ned Kingsley's supercilious silence and cold, indifferent manner, and his face flushed and he decided not to go, after all—but still he sat there looking over towards the Den.

After a while he opened his window, and then through the dripping of the rain he heard the merry music of a college song with banjo and mandolin accompaniment. His eyes sparkled and his fingers fairly trembled as he hastily pulled off his coarse farming clothes and put on his well-worn best suit.

Out in the Den the two boys were waxing merry, for Ned was never so happy as when he was strumming on his mandolin, especially if his chum was by with his banjo. The place looked cozy and cheery, for wood fires were blazing in both fireplaces and the dampness outside made their warmth very agreeable.

"Let's try 'Fair Harvard,'" Ned suggested, and the two boyish voices rang out gaily in the old favorite of Boston boys.

"Hark?" exclaimed Ned, as they finished the

first chorus, and as they listened, soft and low came the sweet refrain, repeated like an echo from without.

As the last note died into silence, Harvey flung his banjo on the bed and ran into the next room. It was unlighted, except by the flickering firelight, but that was sufficient to show Max standing in the darkest corner his guitar under his arm. With a shout of welcome, Harvey drew him into the lighted room, crying out,—

“Look Ned—isn’t this fine? Now we’ll try some of the lively ones? Do you sing too, Max?”

“A little,” Max confessed, and in the hour that followed, even Ned forgot to be stiff and cold, and the three had, as Harvey expressed it, “the jolliest kind of a time.” When at last the instruments were laid aside, Max brought from the other room a corn-popper and a dozen ears of corn that he had brought from the house, and the boys popped the corn over the wood fire till the big pan was full, whereupon they set to work to dispose of it.

From this time, as long as he remained at the farm, Harvey Slade lost no opportunity for a chat with Max. The farmer inwardly fumed and fretted when the boy frequently came to the field and “hung around,” talking to Max—but he said nothing to the visitor—only after the boy had gone, Max had to pay the penalty, for harder work and sharper words were sure to be his portion.

He was willing though to take the bitter with the sweet; and Harvey's friendship was sweet to him.

The day before the Kingsleys were to return to the city was a hard one for Max. In the first place the pigs broke out of their pen just after breakfast, and after the pen had been mended, his uncle and he had a long, trying chase after the truants. Driving these contrary creatures is not often an amusing experience—except perhaps for onlookers—and the farmer lost his temper entirely before the last of the porkers was secured.

"Now take your hoe and set to work on them cabbages," he said to Max, "and see that you waste no time. Half the mornin's been fooled away over them tormented pigs a'ready. If you'd kept watch of the pen as you'd ought to 'a' done, this never'd 'a' happened."

Max made no answer, but his face darkened. Ned and Harvey had been laughingly watching the pig-chase, and possibly the farmer's sharp words were intended as a hint to them to keep away from Max that morning. If so, they failed of their intent, for an hour or so later Harvey strolled over to the cabbage patch and perching on the stone wall near which Max was at work, talked to him as he hoed about the big green cabbage heads. The farmer was banking celery at a little distance, and it fretted him to hear Harvey's tongue rattle on, and his gay laugh ring out every

now and then. Max worked steadily ; the farmer watched him closely and did not see him stop once.

"But it stands to reason he can't get half as much done with that young popinjay jabbering away at him!" the farmer muttered.

He could not vent his annoyance on his paying boarder, but it was bound to be visited on somebody, and Max was pretty sure to be that somebody as the boy knew very well, and he did not enjoy Harvey's gay talk as much as usual that morning.

At dinner, the farmer ate in silence, without glance at any one, but as he rose from the table he said to Max in a surly tone, "Don't you ask that Slade fellow to come down to the field this afternoon!"

"I didn't ask him this morning," returned the boy, and in his tone there was an echo of the unpleasant ring in his uncle's.

The farmer stopped and gave him a threatening glance, "Be careful how ye answer me back!" he said harshly.

Max bit his lips while his wife looked anxiously from the boy to her husband. The next instant she exclaimed with a breath of relief,—

"There's Mr. Ray drivin' into the yard, John."

The farmer went out to see Mr. Ray, and Max turned towards the barn. As he did so he saw Harvey standing in the doorway waiting for him.

"Say, Max," the boy called out, "can't you *cut* work for once this afternoon and go out on the pond with us? It's our last chance, you know. Maybe your sister'd like to go too," he added, for he had not failed to discover that Max was very fond of his sister.

"Wish I could, Harvey," he answered, "but it's out of the question to-day. Storm signal's flying," he added with a gesture towards his uncle.

"That signal's flying pretty steadily in that quarter, isn't it?" laughed Harvey, following Max as he went about his work.

Before the latter could reply, his uncle called in a peremptory tone from the doorway, "Max, hitch Pete into the wagon and bring up a load of cabbages for Mr. Ray, and be quick about it, too!"

It was the tone rather than the words that made the boy's cheeks burn. As the farmer turned away, Harvey looked after him with a scowl.

"Bet you I wouldn't be ordered 'round like that if I were in your place," he said. "Seems as if he can't speak decently to you. I'll go along with you and help load."

"Better not, Harvey," Max answered. "You know I'd like to have you, but he wouldn't," with a nod towards his uncle.

"All right then, I'll see you after supper;" and Harvey walked back to the house. He was sitting on the porch with Mr. Kingsley and Ned when Max came back with the load of cabbages.

“Drive up close here!” called the farmer, who had remained talking with his customer while Max was gone.

The boy obeyed, but Pete, like his master, was in a fractious mood that day, and Max had some trouble in getting him into the required position so that the cabbages could be transferred from one wagon to the other. The farmer stepped around and began to throw the cabbages into Mr. Ray’s wagon, and Max, having gotten Pete where he wanted him, turned back to help his uncle; but, as he let go of Pete’s bit, the horse threw up his head and backed suddenly. One wheel struck the farmer and knocked him down, giving his rheumatic leg a painful blow. Max ran to help him, but he was already picking himself up, and as the boy sprang towards him he accidentally hit his foot against the farmer’s leg, giving it a second sharp wrench.

With an angry word John Ramsay struck out wildly at the boy. To do him justice, he was suffering too much at the moment to realize what he did, but Max did not know that, and as the heavy hand fell upon his cheek he stopped short, and every particle of color left his face, while his dark eyes burned with an angry flame.

To be struck like a dog for no fault of his own, and in the presence of others—what boy of seventeen would not have felt his very being in a white heat of anger at such an outrage?

For a second he stood silent and motionless—then he turned and walked swiftly to the barn.

Half an hour later, John Ramsay found him working with feverish energy in the cabbage field. The farmer was ashamed of that blow and, if he had known how, he would have apologized for it, but he had never in his life said that he was sorry for anything that he had done, and he did not say it now. So the two worked on together in a dogged silence until supper time.

Max did not go to the Den that evening, but Harvey sought him in the barn. Harvey was full of indignation towards Ramsay.

“I’d never stay here in the world if I were you, Max. Why do you?” he asked.

“I won’t much longer, you may be sure of that,” was the determined reply. “I’d clear out this minute if it wasn’t for my sister.”

“You ought to go to Boston,” Harvey went on. “A bright fellow like you could get a place there easy enough.”

“Do you think so?” Max asked quickly. “I’ve heard that there are more applicants than places in all the cities.”

“Oh, that’s all nonsense. Uncle Edward has found places for ever so many boys in the city. The business men are only too glad to get hold of the right sort of chap. I tell you what, Max, I’ll ask him to be on the lookout for a place for you, and you let me know as soon as you’re

ready to come on, and we'll fix it all right for you."

"Will you, Harvey?" cried Max eagerly. "Then I'll come sure—and—before many weeks, too. I can't leave—him"—he would not say "Uncle John,"—"until the harvest work is done, for he couldn't get anybody to help so late as this, but as soon as that's over, I'll be my own master."

He drew a long breath as he threw back his shoulders and stretched out his arms.

"I'd let his harvest rot before I'd stay and help him if he'd used me as he did you to-day!" exclaimed Harvey vehemently.

The color surged into Max Dale's dark cheeks as he recalled that undeserved blow, before strangers too, but he answered steadily,—

"No—I've got to do what seems to me the right thing, and I'll help him through the harvest work, but then—"

He left the sentence unfinished, but Harvey understood and rejoiced.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CITY.

MAX DALE could not forget that blow—the first that he had ever received. In his mind it cancelled whatever cause for gratitude towards his uncle he might have had before, though indeed, he had come to feel that he owed little gratitude anyway to John Ramsay. If he could have looked into the close-shut heart of the man he might perhaps have felt differently, but he could judge only by what he saw and heard.

Neither could the farmer forget that hasty blow. He did not remember much about his own boyhood—there had been in it little enough that he cared to remember—but he could recall a punishment that his father had once meted out to him when he was nearly as old as Max—a punishment that he knew was in some measure deserved, yet he could remember to this hour the burning fury that it aroused in him, and in this case his sober judgment told him—when those painful twinges in his rheumatic leg were over—that Max had not been to blame.

"Wonder he didn't strike back," the farmer thought to himself, "but I do' know but what I'd a killed him if he had, with that leg of mine a hurtin' so like the mischief." He was glad—more glad than he cared to admit even to himself—that his wife had not seen him strike the boy.

The next day, after he had driven his boarders to the station, he went on to Herndon, and made some purchases in one of the clothing-stores there.

Max found another big bundle on his bed that night and opened it wonderingly. It contained a good dark suit of clothes, but the boy's face did not brighten at sight of the garments. Instead, his lip curled scornfully, and without a second glance he tied the bundle up again and put it on the shelf in his closet.

"Too late!" he said, with a hardening of his mouth. He did not tell Helen about the clothes.

The farmer glanced up quickly the next Sunday when Max came down-stairs ready for church, and his face grew dark as he saw that the boy was wearing his old suit. He never referred to the matter, however, nor did Max; but the breach between them was widened by the gift and its rejection.

Through the fall days the boy worked with a zeal, as if he could not do enough. Especially did he devote himself to the woodpile, and, before the harvest work was over, such a huge pile as had

never been there before stood near John Ramsay's back door. But all the boyish brightness had disappeared from Max Dale's face and manner. He grew silent—almost morose—through these fall days, and as soon as his work was done at night he would take his lamp and march off to bed. Even to his sister he said little in these days, and she grieved over the change in him. Life seemed very hard to Helen that fall. Her warm, affectionate heart was chilled by her aunt's strange coldness, as it had been from the first by John Ramsay's harsh speech and manner; and now that Max was so silent and stern Helen would have been forlorn indeed if it had not been for Sepha's loyal friendship.

More than once while the boarders were there Sepha had walked into Mrs. Ramsay's kitchen and taken the iron forcibly out of Helen's hand while she took her place at the ironing table. Sometimes she had spent a whole morning there, her swift and capable hands doing much to lighten the labors of both Mrs. Ramsay and Helen. Now Sepha's quick instinct told her that something was troubling her friend, but she asked no questions; only watched with wistful, loving eyes for a chance to help in any way.

Things being in this state in the Ramsay household, it was a positive relief to Helen when, as September drew to a close, her brother told her he had made up his mind to go to the city in two

weeks. If her aunt had seemed to cling to her and depend on her as she had done at first, Helen would have felt that she could not leave her, but now, she said to herself sadly,

"I don't think it will make much difference to Aunt Mary, and I know that Sepha will come and help her if she should need any help this winter."

Yet, in spite of this feeling, she dreaded to tell her aunt that Max and she were going away. Max did not dread telling his uncle; he had gotten far beyond that point. It was a real satisfaction to him, therefore, when the time came, and he coolly announced his plans. He was turning the grindstone for John Ramsay to sharpen an ax, when he remarked in a careless tone,—

"Uncle John, we're going to the city—Helen and I."

He saw no change in the man's face. He ran his finger carefully along the sharp edge of the ax for a moment before he spoke in his usual gruff tone.

"So! Got it all settled, have ye! When ye goin'?"

"Next week," replied the boy.

"All right. Suit yourself an' there'll be one suited," was the farmer's cool response, and not another word did he say.

How was Max to guess that the man's heart was full of bitter disappointment at the news? How was he to guess that his uncle was proud of

his steady industry, and that he cared for him as much as it was in him to care for any one—except himself? Certainly Max had had small reason to imagine anything of the sort. He said to himself now, “He doesn’t care. I knew he wouldn’t. Expect he’s glad to get rid of us.” Yet after all there was a breath of relief in the boy’s heart—relief that his tidings had been so indifferently received. It made the departure easier.

“You can tell Aunt Mary,” he said, but at this the farmer took his ax and marched off.

“You can do your own tellin’!” he flung back over his shoulder.

Max did not relish this second telling. Though no words on the subject had passed between him and his sister, he too had keenly felt the change in his aunt’s manner, but nevertheless he shrank from telling her that they were going away. He felt instinctively, however, that it would be even harder for Helen than for him to tell her, so he got it over as best he could that night.

As he began to speak his aunt flashed at him one quick, startled glance—then she stopped short in the middle of the room, her eyes downcast and her lips pressed tightly together, until his sentence was finished. She did not utter one word in response. She did not look again at him or at Helen, but, as she stood there, there was in her face an expression that made the boy’s heart ache; and when he ceased speaking, she turned slowly

and gave her husband a long strange look that made him plainly uncomfortable. He started up hastily.

"Come here, Mary," he said, and she followed him dumbly from the room. What passed between them neither Max nor Helen knew.

After this there was no comfort to anybody while the brother and sister remained. The atmosphere was full of constraint and unhappiness, and Max, at least, was deeply thankful when Helen and he were at last seated in the car on their way to Boston. Helen did not feel very thankful just then. She could not forget the yearning, sorrowful look in her aunt's dim eyes when she said, "Good-by." That look haunted the girl, and gave her a wearisome heartache as the train sped on. Sepha's face, too, seemed continually to rise before her—that bright eager little face all drenched in tears as it had been when the girl first learned that her friend was going away. After that one time there had been no more tears, but she had spent every moment that she could with Helen, saying little, but ready to do anything, even the smallest service, for her, with eager satisfaction. When they had passed the Dunlap house on their way to the station, Sepha had stood on the porch and waved a farewell, with a smile on her face; but Helen did not see the same little face when the carriage had disappeared. It was just as well that she did not.

She tried now to banish sad thoughts for her brother's sake. She had absolute faith in him, and knowing what Harvey Slade had said to him, she had not the slightest doubt that Harvey's uncle would find a position for Max at once.

That ten-dollar gold piece had paid for their railroad tickets and there were two or three dollars over. Then Max had written to his Uncle Henry's lawyer, who had transferred to a Boston bank the two hundred and fifty dollars that had come to them from their uncle's estate.

"I shall have to use some of that money to get a suit of clothes and some shoes," the boy said as they discussed their plans while the train sped on, "but I don't mean to use a single dollar more than I can help; and when I get a position we must put back what we have used of that."

"Yes," Helen assented gravely, "we must keep that for capital." It seemed to her, however, a very large sum.

The boy went on: "Helen, Uncle John offered me twenty dollars this morning."

"Did you take it?"

"No, indeed. I couldn't; though I feel that I've earned it, and more too."

"Yes, you have, but I'm glad you didn't take it, Max," she answered decidedly.

As the train approached the city, Helen said, a little nervously,—

"Max, what should we do if Harvey shouldn't meet us at the station as he promised?"

"Oh, he will—I'm sure he will," replied the boy hastily.

"But if he shouldn't?" she persisted.

"Then," he replied thoughtfully, "I should take you straight to the Young Women's Christian Association rooms, until I could hunt up a good boarding-house."

She was glad that he had some definite plan, but her question had made him uneasy, and he gave a sigh of relief when, as they entered the waiting-room at the station, Harvey Slade rushed up to them with a cordial welcome.

"I got a holiday—took one, I mean—on purpose to meet you," he said. "Now come along, and we'll get some supper first thing."

"But—hadn't I better hunt up a boarding-house first? Max asked, holding back. "Got to find a place for Helen before dark, you know."

"Oh, that's all right! I know just the place for you. I raced around there and secured rooms for you this afternoon. You didn't suppose I'd forget that, did you?" and he beamed on them both, with delight in his own foresight.

"That was awfully good of you, Slade," Max said gratefully. "All right then—supper it is!"

Harvey piloted them through the crowd to the car he wanted, and, a little later the three were having a cosy little feast in a restaurant where

Harvey said his aunt always took lunch when she went shopping.

In the relief of the certainty that a boarding-place was secured for them, both Max and his sister gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the excellent supper that Harvey had ordered.

Once or twice the girl's thoughts flew back to the farmhouse table, but she did not like to think how lonely it might be there, and she tried to banish the memory of it.

The boarding-house to which Harvey took them after supper was neat and pleasant, and their rooms, though on the top floor, were quite satisfactory.

"Sky parlors, of course," Harvey said, "but I though you wouldn't mind that as they cost so much less than rooms on the lower floors; and Mrs. Haskill, the landlady, is a good sort. My mother's known her for years. Now I must scoot, but I shall be in to see you again Saturday. Can't get leave before that."

He turned to go, but Max stopped him. "About a place, you know," he said anxiously. "I can't afford any loafing. Does your uncle know of any place for me?"

"Well, I declare! If I'm not a chump! I thought I'd fixed everything right as a trivet for you, and here I've gone and forgotten to ask him again about that. I spoke to him about it when I first came back from your place," he added

hastily, seeing the look of disappointment on Max's face.

"And what did he say then? Did he think he could find me a situation?" the boy asked eagerly.

"Course he can!" was the confident reply. "He said he'd keep his eyes open for you."

Max felt a vague uneasiness creep over him. He had so hoped for something definite. He fully realized the heavy responsibility that rested upon him now—responsibility for his sister even more than for himself.

"But see here, Harvey," he urged, following his friend out into the hall, "I'll have to get something to do right away, you know. We can't afford to be paying out with nothing coming in to balance the account, so wouldn't you better give me your uncle's address, and I'll see him myself to-morrow."

"Yes, of course, that's just the thing for you to do," returned Harvey.

He took from his pocket a card and a pencil, and held the card against the wall as he scribbled an address. "There you are!" he said in a tone that implied that the matter was settled for good and all.

"What a nice boy he is!" Helen said, as Max returned to the room. "He seems so interested for us."

"Yes—he's first-rate fellow," answered Max, "but," he added, thoughtfully, "I wish I were

sure that his uncle would be as much interested in my getting a place."

"Why, don't you think he will find one? Harvey seemed so sure of it."

Max shook his head doubtfully. He was beginning to fear that his prospects were not quite so bright as he had allowed Harvey to persuade him that they were.

Helen had never been in Boston before, and she now fell to studying a dilapidated guide-book of the city which she found in the room, while her brother sat by the window, seeing little of what was passing in the street below, so busy were his thoughts with his hopes and plans for their immediate future.

"I shall have to get my clothes the first thing in the morning," he said at last. "I didn't realize how bad these look until I went into that restaurant and saw the other fellows about."

Helen was silent for a moment. She did not want her brother to suspect how uncomfortable she had felt about her own clothes. He saw nothing amiss with hers because they were not absolutely shabby. He did not guess that she felt quite as ill at ease in the two-year-old hat that her unskilled fingers had retrimmed from old materials, and the dress and jacket too short and too narrow in the back and altogether out of date.

"But I can wait, I must wait until he has a

situation," she said to herself with brave unselfishness. "Max is the first one to be considered."

"Now let's see," he was saying, as he emptied out on the table the contents of his pocketbook, "here's only two dollars and twenty-nine cents left of your ten.—You shall have that ten back again, Nellie, I won't forget it—and I must have a suit and a hat and shoes, before I can go to see Harvey's uncle. He'd never want such a shabby-looking specimen as I am now in his office," the boy went on, unconsciously betraying his secret hope. "And I shall have to go to the bank and draw some money the first thing in the morning."

"Yes," assented his sister.

"And as soon as I get the clothes, I'll go straight to Mr. Saxton's office. Oh, Nellie—if only I could come back and tell you it was all settled—that I'd *got* the place, sure!" he cried.

"I hope it will be so, Max; but if he shouldn't know of a place for you, I can't believe but what you will find one somewhere, soon. I'm certain *sure* you will, Max!"

She spoke hopefully trying to cheer her own heart as well as his, but in spite of their brave hopefulness both sister and brother lay awake long that night, thinking anxiously of their uncertain future.

"What will you do this morning? It will be too stupid for you to stay here alone," Max said

after breakfast the next day, when he was ready to set out for the bank.

"I think I'll go around to the public library. It will be such a treat to get hold of a new book," she answered.

"All right, then, put on your things and I'll walk around there with you first. It's not very far from here."

He left her comfortably established in the reading-room, and then he turned away, after she had given his hand a quick, affectionate pressure by way of a silent "God speed" on his errand.

"To the bank first," he said to himself, as he set off at a brisk pace from the library steps. "It's a mighty big comfort to know the money's there waiting for me, and there can't be any bother about that."

But there was.

He presented his bank-book with a check which he had drawn for thirty dollars. The cashier eyed him over, examined the book, then scrutinized the check, turning it over to look critically at the endorsement; then he consulted some one else, and finally returned and said to the boy, "It's all right, I suppose, but we can't cash your check until you bring somebody here to identify you."

"Identify me?" repeated Max with a touch of indignation. "Do you mean to say that I can't draw some of my own money?"

The cashier looked at him with a lofty smile

that made the boy's cheeks flush. "Any one might get possession of your bank-book and check-pad and come here and draw your money, if we did business that way," he said. "Of course we believe that you are the Malcolm Dale whose money has been deposited with us, but you can understand, of course, that we must have positive *proof* that you are that Malcolm Dale before we can cash your checks."

"But I'm a stranger here, and I don't know anybody except a boy who is at school in Newton; and he couldn't come here with me until Saturday—and I need the money to-day," the boy said with an anxious shadow in his eyes.

"Very sorry, but we can't break our rules. Never would do, you know," was the rejoinder.

Max saw that the case was hopeless. It was such an unexpected set-back that he felt unaccountably disturbed by it.

"Mr. Wade ought to have told me," he said to himself. "I can't wait till Saturday for that money, and I *can't* go to see Mr. Saxton in this rig. Now what shall I do?"

Suddenly he remembered that Mr. Kingsley had an office in Boston.

"He can identify me," he thought. "I hate to ask a favor of him, but I don't see what else I can do."

He stepped back into the bank and asked for a directory. The number of Edward Kingsleys

that he found there was somewhat bewildering, especially as all that he knew about the one of whom he was in search was that he had an office somewhere in the city.

“Good gracious! Look at the list of ’em. Twenty-five Edward Kingsleys!” he said to himself with a groan, “and they’re scattered all over town, too. Well, I suppose I must copy off the whole string of ’em, but I’ll try first those in the regular business quarter. Lucky for me they’re all squeezed in there together so. It’ll save lots of walking.”

His search proved a tiresome and not a very pleasant one. One Edward Kingsley after another he found, and most of them were not over-pleased to be interrupted in office or salesroom by a boy very evidently from the country—a boy who, after one glance at their faces, apologized and backed hastily out to repeat the unpleasant performance in another office. Fifteen Edward Kingsleys Max had thus interviewed before, with a breath of satisfaction, he found himself face to face with the Mr. Kingsley of whom he was in search. But this Mr. Kingsley was by no means so overjoyed at the meeting as was his visitor. Indeed, at first he looked at the boy blankly, and when Max gave his name and hurriedly made known his request, the busy merchant looked decidedly vexed.

“Go over to the bank and identify you?” he

repeated impatiently, "I've no time to be running around town to identify strangers. You'd better ask somebody else."

Max longed to turn away in proud silence and march out of the office, but his need was too pressing to permit any such indulgence of his pride.

"But, Mr. Kingsley," he urged, "there's nobody in the city except you that knows me, and, I'm very sorry to trouble you, but we're here alone—my sister and I—and we must have the money. It's our own, and—and—" He broke off abruptly and turned his face aside. It seemed for a moment as if he could not bear this totally unexpected difficulty about the money.

"Well, well, I suppose I shall have to go with you then," said the merchant as he called a boy and sent him to summon somebody to the office. Then he scribbled hurriedly until the man came, when he gave him some directions, snatched up his hat, and said grudgingly to the boy,

"Come along now—step lively!"

Mr. Kingsley's identification was perfectly satisfactory to the bank-cashier, and Max very earnestly thanked the gentleman, again expressing his regret for the necessity of troubling him.

"Well, well, well! Enough said!" was the testy response, as the merchant hurried away without even a good-morning.

"Hope I'll never have to ask another favor of

him," Max thought as he counted the bills that the cashier pushed under the wire grating to him.

"We shall know you after this," the man remarked, in a more friendly tone than he had used before.

"I hope so, I'm sure," Max replied somewhat coldly, as he walked off.

It was a comfort to find himself once more in a neat, well-fitting suit, though he realized as he never had done before the cost of living, as he handed out one half of the money he had drawn to pay for it. Shoes cost him two dollars more and a cap half a dollar, and then he stepped into a barber-shop where he had a "scientific cut" that was a vast improvement on the "scissorings" that Helen had given him during their stay in the country.

"Feel like another chap!" he said to himself, with a decided increase of self-respect, as he came out of the barber-shop. "Twelve o'clock," he added as half a dozen church clocks rang out the hour. "Too late to see Mr. Saxton now. I'll go home—I mean back—and get lunch with Helen and start out again after one o'clock."

Helen looked at the tall, well-dressed lad with admiring eyes. In her heart she felt sure that any business man must be glad indeed to secure the services of such a boy. Perhaps Max read the thought in her eyes for he laughed a little

consciously, as they went down to the dining-room together.

When the meal was over and they were back in their rooms he told her how he had spent the morning. Her quick sympathy was a comfort to him, as it always was.

"I had such a quiet lovely morning at the library," she said, "and, Max, a lady sat at the same table, and we left at the same time, and she gave me this," showing a Y. M. C. A. card, "and invited me to attend their entertainment to-morrow evening. Wouldn't you like to go? The program looks interesting."

"Maybe so. I'll take you anyhow if you like," he answered as he picked up his cap.

"Oh, Max—I do *so* hope Mr. Saxton will be nice and have a lovely place all ready for you," the girl cried as she threw her arms about his neck and gave him a hard hug.

That made him feel braver and more hopeful as he set out for Mr. Saxton's office; but nevertheless, as he approached the big building he found his courage failing somewhat. It isn't easy to go and ask for employment, and this was Max Dale's first experience in that line.

"Mr. Saxton?" repeated the clerk to whom he applied. "He's not back from lunch yet. He'll be in in the course of half an hour probably."

So Max went out and walked aimlessly about

until the half hour and five minutes over, had slipped away.

Mr. Saxton was in his office, the clerk said when the boy went back. "Wait here and I'll take in your name."

He returned in a few minutes. "This way" he said, and Max followed him, feeling all his hope and courage oozing out at his fingers' ends as he went.

"Mr. Dale? Ah yes—and what can I do for you this morning?" Mr. Saxton inquired pleasantly, as he motioned his visitor to a seat.

"Your nephew, Harvey Slade, spoke to you about me, I think," Max began hesitatingly.

Mr. Saxton laughed carelessly. "Oh, Harvey! He's always at me about somebody or something. He's a great boy—Harvey."

Max did not feel at all inclined to laugh. He was too anxious and earnest. He went on hurriedly, "I've just come to the city, Mr. Saxton, with my sister, and I am very anxious to get something to do at once. Indeed, I must—and Harvey thought that you would be sure to know of some place for me."

"Now if that isn't just like Harvey." Mr. Saxton's tone was half amused and half vexed. "He's no more idea of business than a baby. As if I could find a place for a boy at a moment's notice! Why—do you know how many applications for places for boys, I have had in the past month?"

Max did not know; he did not care, but the gentleman went on,

"More than twenty—yes, sir, more than twenty boys have applied to me for work in the last thirty days. You can judge from that what your chances are."

For a moment the boy was silent, with a heart like lead in his bosom. What was to become of Helen if this was so? He forced himself to speak quietly and calmly.

"Mr. Saxton—I've *got* to find work of some kind to support my sister and myself. What would you advise me to do? Where is the most likely place for me to apply?"

"Well really, now, that's a hard question," was the response. "Let's see—you came from the country I believe, Harvey told me—you can't go back there?"

Go back there! At the question, Max seemed to feel once again his uncle's heavy hand on his cheek, and the hot color flamed in his face.

"No," he answered decidedly, "I can't go back there."

"It's a pity. I always think it's a pity for country boys to leave good homes to crowd into the cities; and having your sister on your hands of course makes it so much the harder. Sorry I can't help you. I'd do it if only to please Harvey—if I could, but you understand how it is."

"And you can't suggest any place where I'd be

likely to find work?" Max questioned again, rising as he saw the gentleman take up some unopened letters from his desk.

"I can't really—wish I could. Pluck and grit sometimes get a fellow into a good position, but even pluck and grit can't always do it. Well—I hope you'll have good luck, I'm sure. Good-morning."

It was a very heavy-hearted boy that left that office—but his heart was heavier yet when, at six o'clock, he went back to the boarding-house; for he had spent the whole afternoon in the search for work, and not one ray of hope, or promise of success, had come to him.

One glance at his face told his sister that he had been unsuccessful. She asked no questions, but began a bright account of the day's happenings, to divert his thoughts.

From the evening papers left in the boarding-house parlor, and from several morning papers that he bought, Max gathered a few advertisements for help wanted, and as soon as breakfast was over the next morning, he set off to answer these. But early as he was, others were yet earlier, and he found every vacancy filled. What was yet more disheartening was the fact that in every case the boy found scores of disappointed applicants like himself. He began to wonder if all the boys in Boston were seeking employment. Many of these applicants, too, were

older than he, and, as he gathered from their talk with one another, far better equipped than he, for office work. Many of them were familiar with stenography and typewriting, and some with telegraphy and book-keeping. Max began to realize how poor were his own chances as he listened to their talk—he a boy of seventeen, with only a high-school education, such as hundreds of other boys had, and no special training in any line.

Again at noon his sister's loving, sympathetic eyes searched his face, and again she asked no questions, but her heart too was heavy as she saw him set forth again on his hopeless quest.

When night came, he was so weary that he would gladly have remained at home, but he had promised to take Helen to the Y. M. C. A. entertainment, and he would not disappoint her. She was strongly tempted to stay at home too, but she thought, with a wisdom beyond her years, that perhaps the little outing would really be better for him than the rest at home with anxious thoughts for company—and so they went.

Helen's library acquaintance was on the watch for her and was at the girl's side as soon as the entertainment was over, and introduced her and her brother to the secretary and several other ladies, who gave the young strangers the most cordial of welcomes, and invited Helen to make free use of their rest-room and reading-room

whenever she cared to do so. The girl was grateful for the warm, friendly interest of these ladies, but she little guessed then how much they would be to her in the days to follow.

For a week Max pursued his search for employment, meeting everywhere the same response. He began to wonder if there was a superabundance of boys in the world, or, at least, in Boston. At first he had had quite a definite idea of the kind of place he would accept, but by the end of the week, there had been a great revolution in his feelings. By that time, he was ready to accept thankfully anything that he could get.

On Saturday Harvey Slade burst in upon them, and his hearty friendliness warmed Max's sore heart even though he had lost all faith in his friend's ability to help him.

Harvey was full of sympathy for Max's repeated disappointments, but he had never had to depend upon his own exertions, and so he could not realize what it was to this other boy to be here in a strange city with so little between him and actual want. He was as cheery and hopeful as ever, and absolutely certain that Max would find an "elegant position" before another week should pass. He wanted the two to go with him to some lively entertainment that Saturday afternoon, but Max refused.

He said he could not spare the time, so Harvey departed, promising to run in the next Saturday

to hear the good news that he was sure Max would have to tell him by that time.

That evening Max asked the landlady for his bill, and he carried it to his sister with an added gravity on his face. It was fourteen dollars for the week.

"I suppose that isn't high, but I did hope it would be a little less," Helen said, as she looked it over.

"If we stay, she'll make it thirty a month for each of us," he answered; "but, Helen, I don't see how we can stay."

"No, of course we cannot pay as much as that; and yet," she looked at him wistfully, "how could we endure a cheaper place, Max?"

He shrugged his shoulders with a sort of desperate impatience.

"We've *got* to endure it, I suppose," he replied.

"I was wondering, Max, if we couldn't do as lots of people here are doing—just rent our rooms of Mrs. Haskill, and get our own meals; do what they call light housekeeping, you know. Those ladies in the rooms below us do that way."

"Well, that might help matters. We can see what Mrs. Haskill would charge for the rooms alone, but then we'd have to get cooking fixings, wouldn't we?"

"Yes, some—an oil stove and a few things, but we could get along with very few, and you know auntie taught me a good deal about cooking.

Her eyes dimmed for a moment as her aunt's worn, sorrowful face seemed to rise before her.

Max drew more money to pay the board bill, and then he questioned the landlady as to the price of the two rooms without board. He told her frankly that he could not afford to pay sixty dollars a month, and that he must reduce expenses at least until he could find a situation. The landlady was not heartless, but she was straining every nerve to make a living for herself and an invalid mother, and barely succeeding. She thought over the matter for a minute or two, and then said that she would rent him the two rooms for twenty dollars a month.

"And that's cheaper than anybody else would rent 'em to you," she added.

"Well, we will take them for a month at any rate," the boy answered. "I hope in that time to find something to do, and then we shall be able to plan farther ahead."

Mrs. Haskill had been standing throughout the interview, and now she turned anxiously towards the kitchen, from which a strong odor of burned pastry had reached her.

"Very well," she exclaimed hastily. "I hope you'll find something, I'm sure," and with the last word she vanished down the stairs while the boy went slowly up to tell Helen of the new arrangement.

"I think we shall like it ever so much better,"

she said brightly ; “ and, Max, I really think it will be a good investment for me to attend the association cooking-class for one quarter. You know they teach economical and health cooking, especially. It’s only a dollar for the three months.”

“ Then you’d better join the class by all means.” Max said, thinking that at any rate it would occupy and brighten some of her lonely hours.

It was well for him, and for her also, that they could not foresee what the immediate future held for them, else their hope and courage might have **utterly failed.**

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BITTER AND THE SWEET.

How endless seemed to Max those winter days that he spent climbing long flights of stairs, or searching through great office buildings for business men who, when he found them, did not want to see him; and yet the weeks seemed to slip away with a horrible swiftness when he paid the room-rent to Mrs. Haskill, or handed his sister the money for table expenses and the washing; for that little hoard in the bank was melting away so fast—so fast, in spite of Helen's careful house-keeping, and the most rigid self-denial on the part of both.

They did not find it easy to be grateful on Thanksgiving Day. Max could not enjoy the holiday, much as he needed it, for a feverish restlessness had taken possession of him, and he felt as if every minute that he was not searching for work was wasted.

Helen had made no unusual preparation, and their Thanksgiving dinner was to be as simple as any other, but, greatly to their surprise, Mrs. Haskill sent up a servant with a tray contain-

ing a bountiful portion of turkey and plum-pudding.

"Wasn't it kind of her!" Helen exclaimed as the door closed behind the servant, but there was a proud flush on her brother's face, and he muttered something about "charity" as he turned his back on the tray.

"You ought not to feel so, Max," the girl said gravely, "for I've helped Mrs. Haskill several times when her waitress has been sick or away. I don't feel as if we were under any obligation to her for this, but it was kind and thoughtful of her, all the same, and I appreciate that."

"Oh, well, if you've done her a good turn—" Max began, and with a brighter face watched his sister as she set out their small table, and both heartily enjoyed their unexpected feast.

By the second week in December, the city began to put on holiday garb, and throngs of Christmas shoppers to fill the stores. Max used to watch the ladies buying finery and jewelry and silverware and toys, thinking, as he watched, how little he and his sister had to spend for food and shelter.

He was standing with his hands in his pockets to keep them warm, and gazing listlessly into a shop window crowded with toys and fancy goods, when the proprietor of the store came out of the door with a lady who wished to point out to him something in the window that she wanted. As she

turned back, a pile of sleds attracted her attention.

"There! That's just what I want for my boy—one of those sleds," she exclaimed. "I'll take one if you can send it to the Union Depot in half an hour—can you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we're so busy to-day, and I've not been able to get extra help," the man replied. "I can send the sled, of course, but not in half an hour."

"Then I can't take it, for my train goes at four," the lady answered decidedly.

Max had listened eagerly and now stepped quickly forward. "I'll take the sled to the depot for the lady," he said.

The shopkeeper eyed him keenly as he asked, "How can I be sure that you will deliver it?"

Max colored. It was the first time that his honesty had been called in question. "I can only give you my word for it," he returned proudly.

"I'm sure he can be trusted," the lady interrupted, smiling into the boy's face, and she handed the man the money for her purchases and hurried away.

The shopkeeper gave the boy another searching glance then he took from his pocket one of his business cards.

"Have you got a pencil?" he asked, and, as Max nodded, "Well, then, tell the lady to write a re-

ceipt on that card and you bring it back to me, now take the sled. You've no time to lose."

The boy picked up the sled and was off on the instant. In the shortest possible time he was back with the receipt. He found the storekeeper trying to wait on two or three customers at once.

As Max held out the card to him, he exclaimed hastily,—

"All right. Look here—can you do up bundles?"

"Yes," was the instant reply.

"Well then—" He raised his voice and called, "Oh, Tom, see here! You come and wait on these ladies and let this boy take your place there."

Tom had been wrapping bundles. Max crossed over to him, and the boy, stopping only to show the newcomer where to find the different sizes of paper and twine, hurried off to assist his employer, and Max set to work as a wrapper. His first attempts were rather clumsy, but he soon saw how to improve on the appearance of his packages, and he worked rapidly and steadily, wasting neither time nor words.

The stores were keeping open evenings now, and he was busy until after nine o'clock. Then the storekeeper, who had kept sharp watch of him, offered him twelve dollars, if he would stay and help him until Christmas, a little over two weeks. Max accepted the offer without a moment's

hesitation, and went home with a glad heart to tell his sister.

"It's only a temporary job," he said, "but I'll do my best, and it may lead to something permanent."

He did do his best, and gave complete satisfaction to his employer; but nevertheless, when the two weeks were over, his work was ended, for the store was a small one and extra help was no longer needed.

"I'm sorry," the man said, when he paid the boy his twelve dollars. "I'd keep you if I needed another boy, and you can refer to me when you want a recommendation."

"Thank you, Mr. Schmidt," the boy answered, and he turned slowly away with a heavy heart.

It was ten o'clock, and Christmas Eve. The sidewalks were covered with snow and the air was keen and cold. He turned up his coat collar and hurried on among the throngs of belated shoppers that crowded the streets. It was hard to go home and tell Helen that he must begin again his disheartening search. How he wished that he could carry her something for a Christmas gift! But he knew that he must not spend even a little of his money so, and he turned his eyes resolutely away from the tempting things in the big windows and hurried on.

Helen was waiting up with a cup of hot chocolate and a sandwich ready for him.

She looked up wistfully as he entered, but when he avoided her eyes, she knew as well as if he had told her that his brief labors at the store were ended; and when she laid her head on her pillow half an hour later, she was thinking sadly,—

“Last Christmas was hard enough, but this—this is more than hard. Oh, *why* can’t Max find *something* to do when he is so good, and tries so hard?” She fell asleep with wet cheeks that sorrowful Christmas Eve.

But nobody would have guessed that the next morning; for she was determined that no word or look of hers should add to her brother’s burden, and her face was bright as the morning, and the morning certainly was bright enough for anybody.

They had no gifts to exchange—these two—but they wished each other “Merry Christmas” with a depth of love and tenderness that was lacking in many a household where costly presents were given and received. Helen had brought from the library a book that she thought her brother would like, and they took turns reading aloud during the morning. After lunch they went for a brisk walk through the snow-covered park. Helen enjoyed that, because most of her walks were solitary ones.

“Oh, Harvey has been here! I’m so sorry we missed him,” she exclaimed as, on returning to their rooms, they saw his card lying on the table.

There was a box with it—a long narrow box, directed to herself. She opened it with flushed cheeks and gave a little cry of delight as she bent her face for a moment over it. It contained only three roses great, heavy-headed, pink ones, with long thorny stems. The room was filled with their delicious fragrance the instant the box was opened.

“Wasn’t it good of him!” Helen cried, as she lifted the roses with loving fingers.

Max did not love flowers as well as she did, but even his eyes lingered appreciatively on these as he answered, heartily, “Tiptop!”

As Helen went to her washstand to find a pitcher which was the only substitute she had for a vase, there came a blundering knock at the door. Max opened it and found a man standing there with a big box in his arms. Helen’s eyes widened with surprise as she saw her own name on this box also.

“Anything to pay?” Max asked.

“No, paid through, but they give me ten cents or a quarter—most folks do—when I take a box up so many stairs,” the man replied.

Max silently handed out a dime. It cost him a pang, for he had never appreciated the value of money as he did now, with the first twelve dollars he had ever earned, in his pocket.

“Oh quick, Max—run down and borrow a hammer to open it,” cried Helen breathlessly as,

the man disappeared with a gruff "Thanky" in return for the dime.

"A hammer!" echoed Max, with good-natured scorn, as he followed the expressman down the stairs, "A hammer to *open* a box!"

When he returned, his sister's face was full of some other feeling than delighted surprise, for she had discovered the letters J. R. on one side of the big box, and her eyes were wet.

She stood silent with hands tightly clasped while her brother with screwdriver and hatchet pried off the cover; and when the cover and the white cloth under it were lifted, then Max did not grudge that dime any longer, but his face as well as Helen's was very grave. For the big box was packed full of sweet home-made bread, and cake and cookies, a basket of eggs—each wrapped separately in paper so that not one was cracked and a plump chicken, stuffed and roasted. Under all these were ears of popcorn and apples—the choice red-cheeked apples that Max knew brought the very highest price in the Boston market.

As she took out the last thing; Helen suddenly broke down and cried; Max stood for a moment looking down at her, then he walked off and stood with his back to her, gazing out of the window.

Presently the girl wiped her eyes and crossed over to him.

"I'm sorry, Max," she said penitently, "but I

just couldn't help it. I seemed to see exactly how Aunt Mary looked, going about the kitchen and cooking all these things and packing them for us. I wonder how she got the box down to the express office. I'm sure she wouldn't dare ask *him* to take it down."

Max made no reply, and his sister went on with a little half-sob that she choked back, "She told me when I gave her the collar and cuffs I had made for her, last year, that that was the first Christmas gift she had ever received. I wish I had had something to send her this year."

She said nothing about the long affectionate letter that she had written, and mailed so that it would reach her aunt on that morning; but she was so glad—so very glad—now that she had done so. She was sure that that letter would be more to the lonely woman than any gift she could have sent.

"Max," Helen went on thoughtfully, "I wonder if we shall ever know what made her so different—last summer."

"*He* made her, somehow or other. I shall always believe that he was at the bottom of it."

"Yes, but I can't understand it; but Max, I've thought sometimes lately, that perhaps we ought to have staid there for her sake—that *I* ought to have, anyway."

He turned upon her quickly, almost fiercely. "You can go back now if you want to," he ex-

claimed, "but *I* never will! I'd rather starve than be struck like a dog!"

She looked at him with mingled terror and reproach. "Max, you *know* I could never want to leave you—never!" she cried. "It was of Aunt Mary I was thinking. Don't you *know* I'd rather starve with you than have everything away from you?"

Max put his arm about her and drew her close. "I guess we'll stand by each other," he said in a voice that was not quite clear.

That generous box supplied the small table for days, but the days and the weeks slipped away, and still Max came back heartsick and weary night after night, and Helen's cheeks grew thin and pale with the long strain of waiting and anxiety. She had expected to attend the high-school, but she could not go when things were so hard for her brother, and their future so uncertain. She longed to do something herself to help, but Max would not hear of her going into a store, and there seemed nothing else that she could do.

Then a door was opened for her. She did not like the work that came through that door, but not for a moment did she hesitate to accept it.

It was one morning early in January just after her brother had gone out, that the girl, running downstairs on some errand, met Mrs. Haskill coming from her mother's room. She had a tray

full of dishes in her hands and her face was troubled and anxious.

At that moment the doorbell rang, and Mrs. Haskill exclaimed,—

“That’s the fifth time that bell has rung within an hour! It seems to me my feet will drop off running up and down these stairs to answer it!”

“Why—where’s Mary?” inquired Helen.

“Left last night,” was the weary response. “She was about as near nothing as a girl could be, but she did answer the bell and save me steps that way.” The bell jangled again as she spoke.

“Let me go this time, Mrs. Haskill,” Helen exclaimed, and hurried down to the door without waiting for a reply.

“It was the postman,” she said, as she returned with a handful of letters for the boarders. Then she added, as she glanced with sympathizing eyes into the landlady’s tired face, “I’m not going out to-day, and I’ll answer the bell for you, Mrs. Haskill.”

“Oh, will you? That will be such a help!” the woman answered in a relieved tone.

Helen ran up and down the two pair of stairs a great many times that day and the next. On the third day a new servant came, but after staying a week she too, took French leave, and the over-worked landlady was almost in despair.

“I never *did* have such a time with help as I’ve had this year,” she moaned, meeting Helen in the

hall after the departure of the last Irish incapable. "What I'm to do now, I don't know."

The girl looked at her thoughtfully. "I wonder," she began, "if I couldn't help you out. It's a waitress that you want, isn't it, Mrs. Haskill?"

"Yes, a girl to wait on the table and the door, and help with the upstairs sweeping."

"Do you want to try me?" Helen asked hurriedly. She was afraid that her resolution would fail unless she spoke then and there.

The landlady looked at her in incredulous surprise.

"Oh, you wouldn't want to—you *ought* not to take a servant's place," she exclaimed, yet with dawning hope and relief in her voice.

"I don't like to, of course," Helen replied, the color creeping up in her pale cheeks, "but, Mrs. Haskill, my brother hasn't yet found any place, and our money is going so fast—if I can help him in this way, I must not be too proud to do it."

The woman suddenly bent and kissed the brave young face warmly.

"You poor child!" she cried, "you're having a hard time, too. I was afraid so. Well now, maybe we can help each other. I'll be only too thankful to have you for a while. It ain't the right kind of work for you, I know, but I'll try to make it as pleasant for you as I can, until you can do better. But your brother—I guess he's kind of

proud, ain't he? He looks so sometimes, and will he be willing for you to do this?"

"No," Helen answered in a low tone, "I'm sure he would not be willing; but then I'm sure too that it is right for me to do it, only—I'd rather he wouldn't know."

"I understand," said Mrs. Haskill with a nod, "and I won't tell him. Well, then, that's settled, that is if the pay suits you. I'll give you ten dollars a month, or no—I'll tell you what I'll do. You are paying me twenty dollars a month for your two rooms. I'll let you have them now for eight. Will that suit you?"

"Yes, indeed!" cried the girl, and then she ran up to put the rooms in order, rejoicing that she could do so much to help Max without his knowledge. He did not suspect why she changed the hours of their meals the next day; and when, in the evenings, she often ran down to answer the doorbell, he accepted, without comment, her careless remark about helping Mrs. Haskill a little.

The boy's thoughts dwelt almost constantly now on that rapidly dwindling bank account, and his unsuccessful search for employment. He had reached the point where he envied the bootblacks and newsboys in the streets, for they at least were earning their living, and that seemed to be more than he could do.

One morning as he left the house, he said to himself, "Now I'm going to begin at the corner

of Tremont and Boylston streets, and I'm going into every single store or office I come to—except those I've been in before ; and I'll try every single business place in this city. When I've been the rounds, then, if there's no place for me anywhere, there's only one thing left to do. I must send Helen back to Aunt Mary, and I'll hire out to some farmer. I know I can get a place on a farm and, big as I am now, I ought to get fifteen or twenty dollars a month, and that would clothe us both and something over."

It was the first time that he had put into words the purpose that had been slowly forming in his mind ; but he felt better now that he had said it, if only to himself. It seemed to make the future a shade less dark now that he had set before himself a definite something that he knew he could turn to as a last resort. He walked on with a steady determined step until he came to the corner of Tremont, and turned into the first store.

No boy was wanted there, nor in the next, nor in any of the many stores and offices where he inquired that day ; yet he kept on with a sort of dogged persistence that would not own itself beaten. In the course of the next week, he had asked for work in every store in the business section—and all in vain. Then he began to try the smaller grocery stores, but with no better success.

The last day of that week seemed to him the

hardest of all. He was so tired—tired body and spirit as he never had been before. Suddenly all his high courage seemed to desert him, and he felt as if the end of his efforts had come. He had done all that he could do; now he must give up the struggle and send Helen back to the country while he, with a tacit acknowledgment that he was beaten, should go somewhere, where no one knew him, and hire out with such fellows as Tim Barney. It was bitter indeed, to the proud heart of the boy, to have all his plans and efforts end like this.

“But what else *can* I do?” he groaned—and then his eyes fell on a card in the window of a tea and coffee store that had just been opened. He stopped short and stared incredulously at the card which bore in big black letters the words, “Boy Wanted.”

One moment he stood there gazing at those two words, the next he had dashed into the store and was breathlessly interviewing the proprietor. Five minutes later, he left the place with head lifted and eyes shining, as he hurried home to tell the good news to Helen. Could he be the same boy that had crawled despairingly along that same street a few minutes before? Certainly he did not feel like the same boy.

He ran up the stairs two steps at a time, and burst in upon his sister crying out,—

“I’ve got a place, Helen—I’ve got a *place*!

Only think of it after all these months ! Helen, I could almost *cry* I'm so glad."

In truth the tears were glistening in his eyes that very moment, but he did not know it. Helen's eyes were shining with joyful sympathy, and her brother in his glad excitement failed to notice that the lids were suspiciously red as she hastily slipped into her pocket a letter that she had been reading when he entered.

She listened with her unfailing sympathy to the story of his disheartening day, and rejoiced with him over the happy ending. Max was far too excited to keep still. He walked restlessly about the room forgetting his weariness as he talked.

"It's a new store, Helen, a tea and coffee store, and everything is as fresh and neat as can be ; and the man—the proprietor—was just as nice and kind ! I took a liking to him right off."

Poor boy—he would have "taken a liking" to anybody who would have given him work that day.

"And guess what pay I'm to have, Helen," he went on.

"Oh—twelve dollars," she ventured, careful *not* to name too high a sum.

"More than that !" he laughed joyously. "Fifteen ! Yes ma'am—I'm to have fifteen dollars the first month, and if I suit, it is to be twenty a month after the first. Suit !" he added. "You

better believe I'll suit if a mortal boy *can* suit. It's lucky I'd got that written recommendation from Mr. Schmidt to show, else some other fellow might have got the place instead of me. Oh Helen! I want to just *howl* for joy!"

"Don't Max—don't be *too* happy. It—it makes me afraid, somehow," his sister cried.

"I *can't* be too happy," he answered. "Only think how wretched I've been all these months. You can't think though, Helen, for you never can know what it has been to me." He turned away suddenly and was silent.

Oh, how glad he was that Helen had not known; that he had been able to lock tightly in his own heart the terrible despair that had so weighed upon him and filled the days with misery; and how glad she was as she looked at him now, that he did not guess how clearly she had understood and suffered with him, keeping a bright face through it all, when he was by. Suddenly she cried out with a joyful little laugh,—

"Oh, Max, now we shall be able to pay all our expenses—the regular ones, I mean."

He gave her a puzzled glance as he answered quickly, "Why no, Helen, fifteen dollars or even twenty won't pay for rent and meals and washing."

She colored, seeing how she had betrayed herself, then suddenly resolved to tell him the secret she had been so carefully keeping from him.

"I can tell you now, Max dear," she said, laying her head against his shoulder in a little coaxing fashion of her own. "I have a situation too. I've had one for several weeks, and my pay is twelve dollars a month."

"Helen—what do you mean?" he questioned gravely. "What have you been doing?"

"Nothing very dreadful, and you mustn't be vexed or—or too proud or anything," she answered quickly, and then she told him of her arrangement with Mrs. Haskill.

He listened gravely. "Well now, that's to stop!" he said decidedly, when the story was told. "now that I've a place I can't have you doing servant's work."

"But, Max," she pleaded, "just think! Even now, you cannot earn enough to more than pay our room rent, and if I keep on helping Mrs. Haskill, what we both earn will pay for all except our clothes, and really, Max, I don't mind the work. Mrs. Haskill is real kind and won't let me do anything hard. Why, she does the upstairs sweeping herself—almost all of it—just to save me."

"I'll warrant you make it up to her somehow," he returned.

She laughed a little. "Well—perhaps I do, but she doesn't treat me one bit like a servant, nor let the boarders do so either. Max, let me keep on a little longer anyway," she urged.

He hesitated. He did so hate to think of his "little sister" waiting on a boarding-house table, but then his thoughts flew back to the small sum remaining in the bank, and he answered unwillingly enough,—

"Well—I suppose—you can keep on a little while, then, but mind you, it won't be for long I won't have it—I *can't* have it, Nellie."

It made her heart glad to see her brother so bright and happy that evening. For so many nights past, he had sat with grave face and troubled eyes thinking, thinking hour after hour, or else he had walked restlessly up and down the room until from sheer weariness he would drop into a chair; but to night, he seemed to have thrown off his anxiety and care, and he talked and laughed and built delightful air-castles all on the foundation of twenty dollars a month, to be earned in a coffee store.

Helen listened and sympathized, but all the time she was conscious of that letter in her pocket. Sepha had written to her every week as regularly as the weeks came—long, affectionate letters full of her own bright thoughts and queer quaint fancies; full too, of bits of news about the neighbors, and the school. Always too there was some word about Mrs. Ramsay, and always there was the message, "She sends her dear love to you and your brother."

Helen had answered these letters promptly at

first, but of late, she had written only once or twice a month, for she had come to feel that even a postage stamp was worth saving. So she used thin paper and sent longer letters at longer intervals back to her faithful little correspondent.

This letter that had come to-day told her that Mrs. Ramsay was not well.

"She hasn't been very well anyway this winter," Sepha wrote, "but she would not let me tell you so. She wouldn't let me now if she knew, but I'm going to do it without her permission. Helen, if you could see how *hungrily* she listens to your letters when I read them to her, and how she remembers every single littlest thing about you and Max—you'd see how much she thinks of you. I think she's just *dear*, and Helen, sometimes lately, I've been afraid that she will never be well again. I think it would do her ever so much good, though, if she could see you once more. Does anybody ever starve to death for want of love? Because—she looks as if she were starving, and it can't be body starving. Couldn't you come back even for a week or two, Helen, just to comfort her? I'm afraid, maybe, if you don't, you'll be sorry by and by and wish you had, and that's why I've written this."

Helen read this part of the letter over again that night, after Max had gone to bed, and there was an ache in her heart as she pictured to herself, the frail, gentle, little woman fading away—starving

perhaps for the love and care that Max and she might have given her.

Before she slept she wrote to Sepha and begged her to write all about her aunt. "Tell her that if she needs me or wants me, I will go to her," she wrote, thinking with a thrill of satisfaction, that she could leave Max for a few days or weeks perhaps, now that his prospects were brightening. Not even for Aunt Mary could she have felt willing to leave him in the anxiety and despair of the past weeks.

"Oh I am so glad—so glad, for him!" was her last thought that night, and I won't let him know about Aunt Mary until I hear again from Sepha."

CHAPTER XIV.

HELD FOR BURGLARY AND ASSAULT.

SHE stood at the window looking after her brother as he set off for the store that first morning, her heart full of thankfulness as she noted his quick firm step and the bright hopeful smile which he threw back to her as he glanced up at the window. He knew she would be there. He knew how many, many mornings she had watched from that window when he had gone off too heartsick and discouraged even to wave a farewell to her.

"Oh, I hope, I *hope* he can keep this place. I believe it would almost break his heart to lose it now," Helen said aloud as she turned away from the window and hurried down to the dining-room to set the table for the boarders' breakfast. The next two hours were busy ones, but her heart was light and she did not mind the work. Then she ran up to put her room and her brother's in order.

"I really must get some cloth and make me some new shirtwaists," she said as, dusting her bureau she caught a glimpse of herself in the glass. "This is too faded to look respectable."

If it was faded, it was immaculately neat, for

Helen was one of those girls who always manage to appear trim and dainty, whatever they wear; and although she was not particularly pretty, there was something in the expression of her clear blue eyes, and in the smile that flashed like sunlight across her face when she was pleased, that made one like to look at her.

"I think," she went on, "that I'll slip out this afternoon and get enough percale for a couple of waists."

Just then the bell rang and she ran down to the door. At sight of the young lady who faced her as she opened it, Helen's face brightened yet more, for it was her library acquaintance—the one who had made her so welcome to the W. C. A. rooms.

"Why, Miss Ross," the girl cried, "I'm so glad to see you!" and she led the way to the parlor.

Miss Ross had kept the girl's hand in hers and was looking down at her with friendly eyes. "I'm glad to know that you *are* glad to see me," she was saying, for I was afraid that you had deserted us all together. Do you know how long it is since you have been to the Association rooms?"

"Indeed I do. It is four months to-day," Helen answered promptly, "but *you* don't know, Miss Ross, how much I have wanted to be there." A shadow flitted over the bright face of the girl as she recalled those hard, hard weeks." If you don't mind climbing stairs," she added shyly, "I'd like to take you up to my room."

“I don’t mind stairs a bit, and I want to be taken up to your room ” was the quick response.

“Then please excuse me one minute, while I speak to Mrs. Haskill,” Helen said, for she knew that the kindhearted landlady would see that she was not interrupted while her visitor remained.

The next hour was one of the happiest that Helen had spent for many a day. Miss Ross was deeply interested in this girl not so many years younger than herself, and so much alone. She sat down with her in the little room, her quick eyes noting the plain furnishings so scrupulously neat and orderly, while she seemed to notice nothing. Before she left, however, she had learned the whole story of the pathetic struggle that the brother and sister had been making through those weary months, and her heart was full of loving sympathy for the two brave young things. Helen had not meant to tell it, but somehow, before she knew it she had done so, and the telling was such a relief to her ! Besides, she did not so much mind others knowing now that the dark days were over—or at least, she hoped that they were. But Miss Ross was looking at her with thoughtful eyes.

“Helen,” she said “it was all right for you to take the work that you are doing as things were with you and your brother, but now that he has a place, we must try to find something better for you.”

“It is kind of you to think of it,” the girl an-

swered gratefully but not hopefully. She had learned much about the chances of finding work in that great city, and so when her visitor went away, Helen remembered only her sympathy and warm friendliness, and speedily forgot what she had said about other work.

But Miss Ross did not forget it and she was not alone and almost friendless in the city, as Helen and Max were. Miss Ross was well acquainted with some wealthy ladies whose ears were always open to any story of need, and who counted their wealth as a sacred trust. To one of these noble women she went that very day and told what she had learned about the two young strangers in whom she was so deeply interested. Miss Ross knew how to make her story very real and vivid, and she succeeded in awakening the interest of her listener.

"I'm glad that you came to me, Miss Ross," Mrs. Benedict said. "Of course we must find better work for this girl. I'm sure you have some suggestion. What is it?"

"I was wondering if the time had not come to carry out that plan of which I spoke to you last fall, you remember, of a kindergarten down on Brown Street among those tenement houses. I think that Helen Dale would be just the one for kindergarten work. Mrs. Springer could take charge of it and let Helen be her assistant."

"Very well. You know I told you last fall that

I would furnish the money whenever you were ready to begin that work. If you are ready now, the money will be forthcoming."

"Oh, Mrs. Benedict, I wish there were more like you in this city," Miss Ross answered, as she rose to depart, "I will talk the matter over then with Mrs. Springer and Helen, and will see you again in a few days."

So, a day or two later, Miss Ross called again on Helen and took her out for a walk—a walk which ended in a visit to a flourishing kindergarten that had been for a year or two under the charge of the Y.W.C.A. Helen never had been in such a place before, and she was deeply interested in it all.

"Oh, Miss Ross!" she cried, "I just long to cuddle some of those dear little tots in my arms. How I'd love to do such work!"

"Would you?" Miss Ross answered quietly. "but don't you think you would get tired of it after a little?"

"Tired? Yes, of course, but I can't imagine any lovelier work."

Miss Ross said no more then on the subject, but she went back with Helen to the boarding-house and, much to the girl's surprise asked to see Mrs. Haskill; and Helen left the two together in the parlor and went upstairs, wondering what it could mean.

She learned what it meant a few days later

when Miss Ross sent for her to spend the day with her, saying that she had Mrs. Haskill's permission. Helen carried the note to the landlady who looked at her kindly as she said,—

“Yes, it's all right. Miss Ross spoke to me about it that day you went out with her, and I'll get the cook's sister to come and help me to-morrow. Go and have a good time, child. I hope your good times are coming now anyhow.”

When Helen reached the Association rooms where she was to meet Miss Ross, she found that lady with her wraps on, waiting impatiently for her coming. She had supposed that she was to spend the day at Miss Ross's own home, and a look of perplexity gathered in her eyes as she left the street car and she saw the poor neighborhood in which they were. But Miss Ross gave her scant time for wonder. She led the way into a building, larger and in better condition than most thereabouts. The elevator took them to the top floor, and then the girl's eyes brightened as she caught the music of baby voices.

“Oh, Miss Ross—is it another kindergarten?” she cried.

Miss Ross nodded gaily. “Yes, it's another kindergarten—a brand-new one too,” she replied, as she pushed open a door.

Helen followed her in and then stood still for a moment and looked around her. Two great sunny, many-windowed rooms, she saw, with

freshly tinted walls and shining floors. In one there were many little white beds, and from this opened a big bathroom shining with cleanliness.

The other room held small tables and chairs, a big blackboard, and a case of drawers filled with all sorts of things fascinating to baby eyes and baby fingers, as she learned afterwards.

From this room opened a kitchen—and such a kitchen!

“It would be just fun to cook and work in such a lovely kitchen as that,” Helen thought, and then she forgot all about the rooms as her eyes fell upon the little pale-faced babies lying on the white beds or toddling about the floors. Clean as new pins they were, every one of them, with dresses that certainly could not have been worn many minutes, she was sure; but before she could ask any questions, Miss Ross was introducing her to several ladies who were seated in the larger room, and before the girl could fairly realize it all, she had accepted the offer made her to assist in this lovely work—at a salary of twenty dollars a month.

She did spend the day with Miss Ross—there—learning about her new duties, and cuddling babies to her heart’s content.

“Oh, I’m so happy—so happy!” she exclaimed softly, once, “Look, Miss Ross, she’s gone to sleep in my arms,” and as Miss Ross looked from the shining eyes of the girl to the placid little baby

face resting on her arm—she smiled with satisfaction, as she answered,—

“I believe you’ve found your work.”

“Oh!” cried the girl with a long glad breath, “I never knew before how *dear* babies are!”

Happy days followed for Helen as well as for her brother. Such days as almost blotted out from their memories those hard, hard months preceding—almost but not quite. Sometimes Helen would recall them with a shudder, and sometimes Max would wonder what he should do, if he should lose his position. Never did a boy try harder to please his employer than Max tried. He worked as if the store were his own, and the proprietor realized the fact that not a little of his increasing trade was due to the boy’s unfailing patience and courtesy with customers who were not always patient and courteous themselves.

“I’ll hang on to that boy as long as I run this store,” the man thought to himself more than once, but it is the unexpected that happens usually and it was the unexpected that happened in this case.

Max had been employed at the coffee store just one month, and this was his pay day. He had thought of it exultingly many times as he went about his work. It seemed to him that he could almost feel the bills in his fingers as he ground coffee and tied up bundles of tea and sugar.

“I wonder if it will be three fives, or smaller

bills," he thought. "Anyhow, I'm pretty sure I've suited Mr. Reynolds. He's never found a word of fault with me—never once."

It seemed to the boy as if he could hardly wait, so eager was he to have the money really in his pocket—to hasten home with it and spread it out before Helen. And after this month Helen and he would each have twenty dollars every month. No more drawing from the bank then. They might possibly put back a little of what they had been obliged to use. He was determined to do it if possible.

So ran the boy's thoughts while, with a bright face he went about the store making everything ready for night. He was so happy that once or twice he broke into a gay little whistle, but he checked it as soon as he realized what he was doing. Perhaps Mr. Reynolds wouldn't like him to whistle in the store even if there were no customers there.

At last everything was done. He stood in the middle of the bright little place and looked critically about him. No, there certainly was nothing else to do. He took his cap and walked over to the desk where the proprietor was sitting with a letter open before him.

"I believe I've attended to everything, Mr. Reynolds," he said cheerfully.

Mr. Reynolds started and looked up at him. As he saw the happy light in the boy's eyes, his

own face clouded. He did not know very much about this boy's life, but from a chance word now and then, he had gathered some idea of the long, hard experience that had made Max so thankful for the work that he now had. Mr. Reynolds frowned.

"Feel's if I was going to strike him," he thought, then he said hastily, "Let's see—believe your month is up to-night, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Max answered, his heart beginning to beat heavily because of something that he could not—dared not, understand.

Mr. Reynolds took from the drawer four five dollar bills and laid them on the desk. The boy's eyes sparkled as he took them, then he handed one back.

"It was to be only fifteen the first month," he said.

"That's all right," the man replied, pushing the bill again towards the boy, "but look here, Max—I'm sorry, but I can't keep you any longer."

Such a look of agony flashed into the dark eyes uplifted to his, that Mr. Reynolds moved uneasily and turned his own eyes away.

"Why—Mr. Reynolds, *haven't* I suited you? I've done my very best. Tell me what more I can do, and I'll do it no matter what it is—but *don't* turn me away!" cried the boy, trying vainly to keep his voice quite steady.

Mr. Reynolds held out his hand and grasped

the one that Max instinctively held out to him.

"Yes, yes, Max," he exclaimed hastily, "you've done all and more than all that I could expect any boy to do. I'd keep you if I could, you may be sure of that; but here," he glanced at the letter on the desk, "I've just got word from my sister that her husband is dead. She's left with half a dozen children, and she asks me to take the oldest boy into my store. I must do it, Max, for I can't help her any other way and I guess you know pretty well how hard he'd find it to get a place anywhere else."

Max nodded. He could not speak just then.

Mr. Reynolds went on, "After I get established here and have a bigger trade, I shall need more help—maybe by fall—but I can't afford now to pay two boys. I'm sorry—but you see I can't help myself."

Still the boy stood silent. So changed was his face that the man looking at him could scarcely realize that he was the same boy who had been whistling cheerily about the store so few minutes before. He waited a moment, then went on,—

"You'll have a better chance to get a place now, Max, for I'll give you the finest recommendation that I can write, and I only wish I could do more."

"Thank you," the boy braced himself to say, but there he stopped, and after a vain attempt to

add more, he turned away abruptly and almost ran out of the store.

"Poor fellow!" Mr. Reynolds said, with an unaccountable dimness in his eyes, "Poor fellow, he deserves better luck than he has had so far."

And Max went blindly through the streets, looking neither to right nor left, but hurrying on towards Helen. When he reached the house, however, he felt all at once that he could not face her then. He remembered how gaily he had hurried off that morning telling her that he would bring her his "wages" when he came home. He had his wages indeed, but how *could* he tell her! He turned away and walked the streets for an hour before, weary and exhausted, mind and body, he stumbled heavily up the stairs.

Helen was watching for him as he had known she would be. She had begun to be anxious because he was so late, and her anxiety deepened as she heard his step on the stairs, so different from the quick glad way in which he had gone up and down for a month past. The moment she saw his face she knew that something was wrong, and she cried out anxiously :

"What is it—oh, what is it, Max?"

He dropped wearily into a chair. "Nothing, only I've lost my place," he answered moodily.

The story was soon told, and then, like the brave little soul that she was Helen set herself to cheer and comfort him. She told him that he

was sure to get a place soon with such a recommendation as Mr. Reynolds promised him ; and anyhow, it wasn't half so bad now that she was earning twenty dollars a month. And then she coaxed him to eat, and told him all the bright and funny sayings and doings of the little kindergartners ; and she was so bright and sweet and altogether lovely to him that he couldn't help brightening a bit himself, and hope began once more to whisper in his heart.

But oh, how he hated to resume his heart-sickening search for work ! Yet he did it the very next morning.

" I'll go first to Mr. Schmidt," he thought. " He may possibly know of something."

Mr. Schmidt always gave him a friendly welcome and he listened to his story now with kindly interest.

" Too bad, too bad !" he said, " I was hoping you had a settled place there. Now let's see, what are you going to try next ?"

" I don't know, Mr. Schmidt," the boy replied. " I'm afraid I'm about discouraged."

" And I don't wonder," the shopman returned. " Look here now, are you willing to take a low-down job rather than nothing ?"

" I won't go into a saloon, but I'll do anything that's honest," Max answered.

" Ye don't catch me advising ye to go into any saloon, though that's where you'd find a place easy

enough ; but I heard a man yesterday inquiring about somebody to take charge of a vacant house for a while. Would you take a job like that ? ”

“ Be thankful to get it,” returned the boy quickly.

“ All right then, come along, and if he hasn’t found somebody else, I guess I can get him to take you.”

The man to whom Mr. Schmidt took the boy was a lawyer who had been employed to settle up the affairs of an insolvent bank. Among other properties belonging to this bank was a house to which a man named Baker laid claim ; and the lawyer wanted some one to stay in the house day and night, to prevent this Baker from getting into it as he had threatened to do until the matter could be legally settled.

Mr. Atwell, the lawyer, looked doubtfully at Max when Mr. Schmidt told why he had brought him there.

“ But you’re not the sort of fellow for this work, he said. “ It’s the kind of job we give to darkies and Irishmen and that sort.”

“ It’s honest work,” returned the boy, “ and I’ve just lost my place. I’ll do this as well as any darkey or Irishman.”

“ That’s so ! ” declared Mr. Schmidt. “ He’s worked for me and you can be sure that he’ll do as he’s told to do.”

“ But I don’t believe he understands. This is

a mighty lonesome sort of job—staying alone day and night in an empty house! You'd get sick of it," the lawyer added, turning again to Max.

"Try me and see," replied the boy, briefly.

The lawyer looked at him keenly, then he answered slowly, "Well, all right, if you want the job. You can go straight up there now." He scribbled the address on a card and gave it to the boy. "I'll send up a cot-bed and a chair or two and some fuel. You've got to have a fire in this weather. And now remember—you are never, on any excuse, to leave that house one moment alone. This man Baker will undoubtedly try to slip in and get possession. That's what you are to prevent. Do you understand?"

Max nodded. "Yes—and since I don't know Mr. Baker, of course I'm to admit nobody."

"That's it exactly. Admit nobody unless by my order. As to Baker though, you'd recognize him easily enough. He's six feet four inches high, thin as a rail, and wears a long red beard. If you see anybody answering to that description, prowling around, look out for him."

"But how will the boy get his meals?" inquired Mr. Schmidt.

"Here!" The lawyer tossed over a package of postal cards. "Send to any grocer or butcher, and he'll deliver what you order if you've the money to pay for it."

Max took the cards, but he thought he could

arrange otherwise about his meals; at least, he hoped that he could. He left Mr. Schmidt at the lawyer's door with hearty thanks for his kindly interest and help, and hurried around to Mrs. Haskill's where he scribbled a hasty note to tell his sister where he was going, and ask her to come and see him the next morning before going to the kindergarten. Then he went on to the vacant house.

It was in rather a lonely neighborhood, and had an empty house on one side, an alley on the other, and a number of vacant lots opposite. The lawyer had given him the keys, and he unlocked the door and went in. He shivered in the close chill air of the unused rooms, but the sun was shining, and he sat down on a wide window sill where the sunlight kept him fairly comfortable.

Within an hour a wagon drove up with a spring cot and bedding, two chairs, a basket of wood, a lamp and some kerosene oil. Even these the boy would not receive, however, until the driver handed him Mr. Atwell's card.

"Wouldn't like your job, boss!" the colored man remarked, as he took his departure after he had carried in his load.

Max was not at all sure that he liked it himself, but then he was not thinking nowadays of what he liked. Nevertheless, he could not help feeling rather lonely and dreary in the great bare cold place, and he stood at the window and watched

the man as long as he was in sight. Then he kindled a fire with the wood and some coal that he had found in the cellar. He was at work over the fire when he was startled by the ringing of the door bell. The sound was so unexpected, and it echoed so through the great empty rooms! He ran to the bay window and looked out through the slats of the shutters. The next moment he ran to fling open the door for it was Helen who stood on the steps.

How glad he was to see her! It seemed as if he had been shut in there for days instead of barely two hours! As for Helen she looked about the place with grave unsmiling eyes.

"I don't like it, Max," she cried. "It's going to be awfully lonesome and dreary. I just can't *bear* to think of you all alone in this great house, especially nights. Just think if you should be sick?"

He laughed at that. "Sick!" he repeated scoffingly, "Have you ever known me to be sick in the night, or in the daytime either, for that matter?"

She had to admit that an occasional headache was the extent of his suffering in that line. "But you might be, all the same," she urged. "Max—I don't like it. Can't you give it up?"

"No, Helen," he answered, gravely "it's the only place open to me and I must stay here until I hear of something better. But don't you worry

about me. I shall be comfortable enough here nights—shan't be cramped for room a bit," he added laughingly, "and I'm to have fifty cents a day for sitting here doing nothing."

She shook her head, silenced but not convinced, and then she began to empty a big basket that she had brought with her.

"But, Helen," her brother remonstrated, as she took out several cooking utensils, "whatever made you lug along all those heavy duds? I can't use 'em. I shall live on 'cold victuals' mainly while I'm here.

"Not much, Malcom Dale!" she returned indignantly, "And nobody wants you to use these 'duds' as you so disrespectfully call my nice little pots and pans. I want you to understand that I intend to take my breakfast and supper here in this house as long as you take yours here, and I intend to do the cooking myself, too!"

"Oh, but Nell,—you mustn't think of doing that! It will make it too hard for you to come around here so early, and then go back home alone after supper. I can't have it."

She swept him a merry mocking courtesy. "How are you going to help yourself, sir?" she said, "unless you lock me out as well as Mr. Baker, and if you do that, I shall just sit on the doorstep and *starve*! I give you fair warning."

He saw that it was useless to argue the matter, so he wisely dropped it, and watched her as she

went about arranging her cooking utensils and dishes to suit her own neat ideas. Suddenly he exclaimed,—

“Why, Helen, how could you get here at this time of day? I thought you staid at the kindergarten until three.”

“So I do, most days, but to-day there was an extra girl on duty there—a beginner—and Mrs. Springer let me off to do some shopping; and when I went home I found your note—it was an awful scrawl, Max, I could hardly read it,” with a mischievous glance at him, “then I just picked up these things and came straight up here, and here I’m going to stay, sir, until after supper!” she added with a decided little nod of her bright head.

“And the shopping?” he questioned.

“Oh, the shopping—that can wait,” she answered carelessly. “There wasn’t much of it anyhow.”

She made the hours pass swiftly and pleasantly, and cooked for him the nicest supper they could afford; and when it was eaten and the few dishes washed, still she lingered, until he absolutely refused to let her stay another minute.

“For I shall do the worrying if you are out after dark,” he said gravely, and so reluctantly enough, she went away.

It was his turn now to watch from the window, and hers to smile bravely and brightly back to him; but when she had turned the corner the

brightness speedily vanished, and tears chased the smiles from the brave blue eyes.

"Alone all night in that great empty house!" she said to herself. "If *only* he'd let me stay there with him!"

She was back again bright and early the next morning ready to cook their breakfast, with a running accompaniment of merry chatter that gave no hint of the tears of the night before. She could not linger long this time however, for she must be at the kindergarten early. As she ran down the steps with a backward glance at the window, she nearly ran into a man who was approaching—a tall thin man with a long, reddish beard. He went up the steps, but Max had seen him, and though he rang again and again, the boy did not appear at either door or window. From behind closed shutters however, he watched until he saw the tall figure go slowly away.

"No admittance, Mr. Baker" he said aloud then "no admittance while I'm in command here."

Two weeks crept by—crept with lagging steps indeed it seemed to the active boy unused to an indoor life. He used to run up and down stairs and even sometimes slide down the banisters, by way of exercise: and sometimes he practised gymnastics in the back yard, and sometimes he climbed out through the skylight and walked on the roof. Often he saw the long lank figure of Mr. Baker loitering by and eagerly scanning doors and win-

dows. Once he saw the man peering over the fence into the back yard. The boy *happened* to throw some water out of a back window just then, and some of it landed pretty close to the reddish head peering over the fence—and the head did not appear there again.

But the days seemed endless, and oh, how he dreaded the long lonely evenings after Helen had gone! He watched always until the last glimpse of her dress had disappeared, and then he would read or try to study, but it was dull work. Several times Mr. Atwell appeared at unexpected hours, and the boy understood that the lawyer was watching to see that he did not neglect his duty.

"He needn't watch me if he did but know it," the boy said to himself, proudly.

The last time that Mr. Atwell came he stopped and chatted with the boy for a while. As he was leaving, he said,—

"By the way, aren't you about out of coal? You must have used up all there was in the cellar."

"Not quite—but it's nearly gone," Max replied.

"I'll get some around to-day. Shall I send a man to store it?" the lawyer added, with a keen glance at the boy.

"No. I'd rather put in coal than do nothing," Max answered promptly.

The lawyer nodded as if the quick reply pleased him.

"Very well, I'll send it right up," he said.

An hour or so later, Max saw the wagon stop before the house and the coal was dumped on the sidewalk. He signed the driver's slip and then went to work to put in the fuel, but he kept a sharp lookout for Mr. Baker, and each time that he took in a hodful of coal, he bolted the door behind him. Once he thought he caught a glimpse of Mr. Baker some distance up the street, but as the man he saw did not come near the house, he concluded that he was mistaken, and worked on.

There was not much passing on the quiet street at that hour. Two or three children went by while he was at work there, and one woman ; but still he kept watch. He had gathered up the last scattered bits of coal and turned to carry them in, when suddenly the door of the adjoining house was flung open and a young man sprang out, and threw himself over the railing of the step into the area of the house of which Max was in charge. It was all done in an instant and, as the boy, dropping his coal, darted forward, the basement door was slammed in his face and he heard the rattle of the bolt as it was slipped.

For an instant he stood motionless, his heart sinking. Then he sprang at the door and beat upon it furiously, calling upon the man to let him in ; but there was no response, only, as he looked up, a face peered out at him from the parlor window—a face that wore a mocking, triumphant smile.

"Oh dear!" thought Max, "after all my care they've gotten in at last. I wish I'd let Mr. Atwell hire a man to put in the coal, then this couldn't have happened."

He was mortified—ashamed—feeling that he had failed in the trust committed to him. He picked up his hod of coal and set it down in the area, then, all dusty and dirty as he was, hurried to Mr. Atwell's office to tell him what had happened. The lawyer was at first inclined to blame him but when he had heard the boy's story, he said ruefully,—

"Well, they've got the best of us, that's all there is to be said about it. Now, the question is—can we turn the tables on them?"

"Mr. Atwell," the boy began hurriedly, "my sister has been every afternoon to cook my supper for me, and I'm afraid she'll be there before I get back. I think I'd better hurry back at once."

"All right—go on up there, then, and I'll follow you as soon as I can leave the office," the lawyer returned.

Max wasted no time, and to his great relief he saw Helen just approaching the house as he turned the corner. He shouted to her and she stopped and waited, staring at him, wonderingly.

"Why, Max—how do you happen to be out?" she questioned.

He told her the story in a few words and as he

told it, the young man stood at the window looking out at them with the triumphant smile still on his lips.

Max ground his teeth as he stared up at him. "I'd like to punch his head," he growled. Then he turned his back on the aggravating vision in the window, and said to his sister, "Now, go home, Helen. I must wait here until Mr. Atwell comes, and then if there's nothing to be done—and I don't suppose there is—I'll go home too."

"But—oh dear! There are our cooking things and your books and all, in the house?" cried Helen, with a disturbed expression.

"Can't help it. That chump wouldn't hand 'em out if I should ask him," her brother replied, with anything but a friendly glance towards the window.

So Helen went away casting more than one troubled look backward as she went, while Max with a dogged determination to "see it out," sat down on the doorstep.

After a while Mr. Atwell appeared, but the young fellow within paid no more attention to his summons than he had to those of Max.

"The back door is locked, of course?" the lawyer said inquiringly, when he was satisfied that the man inside did not intend to open to him.

"Yes, I always kept it locked."

"Of course, that was the right thing to do, but I could wish now that you'd forgotten it for once."

The color flushed the boy's cheeks and his eyes began to shine.

"Mr. Atwell," he exclaimed his, breath coming quickly, "I believe one of the back basement windows *is* unfastened. I remember now that I opened it when I was sweeping out the kitchen this morning, and—I can't remember locking it. Maybe I did, though. Shall I climb over the fence and see?"

"Probably that fellow will have discovered it and locked it, and anyhow, climbing in through a window would be counted as burglary, I suppose," the lawyer answered.

But the boy heard only the first part of his reply; by the time the last words were uttered he had darted around through the alley and flung himself over the fence. The lawyer followed. As he sprang over the fence, he saw Max step up to the basement window and call upon the fellow who stood within looking out at him, to open the door.

"*Don't* ye wish I *would*—*don't* ye just?" mocked the stranger, and then as he caught sight of Mr. Atwell, he flung at him an insulting taunt, his face red with rage—for he was Mr. Baker's son, and father and son alike hated the lawyer with a bitter hatred.

Max heard the insolent taunting words and thought that they were addressed to him. Sensitively alive to what seemed to him the shame

and mortification of having allowed himself to be so easily outwitted, his hot temper suddenly flamed up at the insolent taunt, and never heeding—indeed, never hearing—the warning cry of the lawyer behind him, he flung up that still unfastened window, sprang over the low sill, and had collared the fellow and dragged him to the door—flung it open and flung him out—before either fairly realized what was being done. Max often wondered afterwards how he had been able to do it, for young Baker was older and stronger than he; but so sudden and furious was his onset, and so totally unexpected, that the other was taken by surprise and conquered before he could collect either his wits or his strength for resistance.

“Well—that’s about the quickest victory I ever witnessed,” remarked the lawyer, as Max bolted the door, and slamming down the window locked it in the very face of the foe who was gathering himself up from the area where he had landed.

The young man turned upon the lawyer in furious anger. “Just you wait!” he shouted, “just you wait! This is assault and battery—that’s what this is, and I’ll have the law of ye both for this!”

“I’m afraid you will,” the lawyer thought, but he answered quietly and coldly, “The law cuts more ways than one, young man, don’t you forget that.”

Still muttering vengeful threats, young Baker flung himself over the fence, and then Max unbolted the door and admitted the lawyer.

"Well, sir, you've put your foot in it now, sure enough!" Mr. Atwell said, but though the words were disapproving, the smile with which they were spoken encouraged the boy to answer,

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, Mr. Atwell, but—I'm afraid I was so mad when he yelled that at me that I didn't stop to think what I was about."

"It was at me that he flung that choice remark of his," the lawyer returned; "but never mind, I guess we can pull you through all right."

Max looked at him inquiringly. "I don't quite understand—" he began.

"Didn't you hear his threat as he went over the fence?"

"No."

"He threatened us with a suit for trespass and assault."

"But—can he do it, Mr. Atwell?"

"Bring suit? Certainly."

The boy began to look anxious. "Will he have me arrested?"

"He may."

"Oh, Mr. Atwell, can't you help it? I didn't know—I thought he had no business in this house, and that I had a right to put him out if I could." He stopped, visions of a trial and of a prison cell flashing through his mind. Oh, what would

Helen do? The shame and disgrace of it would be so terrible to her! He did not think of himself then. He looked at the lawyer with pleading eyes. "*Can't* you keep me out of prison, Mr. Atwell?" he cried.

The lawyer answered in a reassuring tone, "I hope so. I'll do my best for you. But now, let's see—do you want to throw up this job?"

The boy drew himself up and threw back his head proudly. "No, sir!" he answered.

"Plucky!" thought the lawyer, then aloud he added with a thoughtful glance at the boy, "I believe I'll stay here with you to-night."

"I'm not *afraid*, Mr. Atwell!" cried the boy quickly.

The lawyer smiled. "There may be danger of a sort that you haven't thought of," he answered. "Anyhow, I think I'll stay; but I'll get you to take a note to my wife, if you don't mind."

"Oh, no—and if *you* don't mind, I'll run around and let my sister know. Last she knew I was locked out."

"All right—and I guess when you come back, you'd better bring some extra provisions. I don't know how it is with you, but I'm getting hungry."

Max had not thought of being hungry; he was still far too excited for that—but he took the dollar that Mr. Atwell handed him, as he told him what to purchase with it, and hurried away. The lawyer stood at the window looking after him.

"Good stuff in that chap," he said to himself. "If I had any place for him I'd take him into my office, sure."

Max wasted no time. He delivered the note to Mrs. Atwell first, then hurried around to Mrs. Haskill's, where he found his sister anxiously watching for him. He did not tell her the details of the affair—only that the intruder had departed, and that Mr. Atwell was going to stay in the house with him that night.

"Oh, I'm glad of that—it won't be so lonesome for you," she answered in a tone of relief, as she hastened to fill a basket with provisions for his supper and breakfast.

"Poor little girl!" Max was thinking as he kissed her good-by, "she wouldn't sleep a wink to-night if she knew what is hanging over me."

He bought what Mr. Atwell had ordered and hurried back to the house, where he found the lawyer somewhat impatiently awaiting him. He had not found it especially cheerful waiting alone in the big empty house. He wondered how the boy had been able to endure it for two whole weeks.

Max cooked their supper, and the lawyer exerted himself to make the time pass pleasantly, but all the while he was listening for some sound outside; so when, at nine o'clock, the door-bell jangled noisily, it was only Max who gave a nervous start.

"Wonder if that fellow has come back!" he said.

"We'll investigate," the lawyer answered, taking up the lamp and going to the bay window from which he could look out on the steps. Max followed and his face lost its color as the light flashed upon the badge and buttons of an officer, who demanded admittance.

"All right!" responded Mr. Atwell, and he promptly opened the door.

"I've a warrant for the arrest of Malcolm Dale. This the fellow?" the officer inquired, laying a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

"This is Malcolm Dale, but what do you want him for?" the lawyer answered, with a reassuring glance into the boy's anxious eyes.

"On a charge of criminal trespass and assault—sworn out by William Baker," was the officer's matter-of-fact answer.

"Look here now—this is all nonsense. It's that Baker fellow himself that's the guilty one, you know," Mr. Atwell replied coolly.

"Do' know nothin' 'bout that," the officer answered stolidly. "All I have to do is to obey orders."

"Well, see here, officer—you know me?" the lawyer said.

The man nodded.

"And if I give you my word that I'll produce this boy in court to answer to this absurd charge, you'll leave him here to-night, won't you?"

The man hesitated; but Mr. Atwell was a

lawyer of good standing—a man whose “word was as good as his bond,” and the officer knew it. He finally agreed to leave the matter so.

Max drew a long breath of relief as the man went away, but his face was still full of anxiety, as he exclaimed, “Oh, Mr. Atwell, *shall* I have to go to prison?”

“Oh, I guess not. Don’t you worry about it, my boy,” the lawyer answered kindly. His interest in the proud, manly lad was deepening, and he determined to do his best for him. “I don’t think that we shall have any more callers to-night, so we may as well ‘turn in’ as the sailors say.”

But Max slept little that night, and when he did sleep visions of judge and jury and prison cells, made his slumbers troubled and unrestful.

The lawyer went away early in the morning. He had stayed because he expected the coming of an officer, and wanted to be by for the boy’s sake.

Helen came soon after his departure, and tried her best to cheer her brother as she prepared his breakfast. Max responded as well as he could, but he was very thankful that she could not read his thoughts, and that no suspicion of the danger threatening him had come to her.

Soon after Helen’s departure the bell rang, and through the window Max saw a young man with a bright, wide-awake face and manner. The boy opened the window and inquired his business.

"I just ran around to have a little talk with you about that affair yesterday," was the bland and smiling reply. "You see I happened to hear all about it—that is about Baker's side of it—and I came to the conclusion that he'd done some pretty tall lying. He accuses you of all sorts of things, you know."

"What sort of things?" asked Max.

"Oh, of breaking into this house and attacking him without the slightest provocation, and so on."

"That's not true!" Max declared indignantly.

"I didn't suppose it was. You don't look like that sort of chap. I'll bet now, it was he that did the sneaky part and you did only what you thought was your duty—eh?"

The young fellow's friendly manner and evident belief in his innocence won Max's gratitude, and he never thought of refusing to answer questions put to him with so much apparent interest and kindness. He had a long talk with his visitor—a talk which shortened for him the tedious hours of that anxious morning. He was in continual dread of the reappearance of the officer, but the day dragged by and he did not come.

But when Helen came the next morning, her eyes were red and her cheeks pale, and she silently handed her brother one of the city papers in which was a distorted account of the whole affair with glaring headlines giving Max's name

in full, and telling when his trial was to come off. The boy's face whitened as he read it.

"Oh, Max" Helen moaned, "can't anything be done? *Will* you have to go to prison?"

He comforted her tenderly telling her what Mr. Atwell had said.

"I think he'll fix it all right, Nellie. You know he's a lawyer and used to managing such cases. I don't honestly believe there's a bit of danger, for really and truly, that Baker fellow had no more right in this house than he would have to go into Mrs. Haskill's and lock her out. But what makes me furious, is this thing in the paper. Everybody that knows us will read it, and lots of folks will believe it all. There!" he added springing up and walking restlessly about the room. "That fellow that came here yesterday and seemed so friendly—must have been a reporter. Why *was* I such a fool as to tell him where we came from and all! I might have guessed what his great interest meant."

Then as he looked at his sister's tear-stained face, his own filled with unselfish sympathy for her. "Poor little girl!" he said, putting his arm caressingly about her, "It's hard on you to have to be ashamed of your brother, isn't it?"

Unconsciously enough, he had touched the right note, for Helen's arms were about his neck in a flash and a look of loving pride drove the misery from her face, as she cried, "Ashamed of my

brother? As if I *ever* could be that!" She stood up and flung back her head proudly, forcing a cheerful smile as she went on, "You've done nothing wrong, and as long as that is true we've no reason to be ashamed. I'm sure—*sure* that Mr. Atwell will clear you somehow, and as to that horrid newspaper article—" She snatched up the paper and crowded it into the fire. "There!" she added, "it has gone up in smoke, and I'm not going to think of it again."

She exerted herself to the utmost to make the breakfast hour bright and cheerful, and crowded down food that almost choked her so that Max would eat too; and when at last, she was obliged to go away she ran back twice to whisper a new word of cheer and comfort.

But that was a sorrowful day for her in spite of her brave efforts to rise above her trouble. It was hard to have to tell the story over and over again to Mrs. Haskill and Miss Ross and others who had read the account in the paper. And it was hard to think of her brother alone there in the empty house with a heart full of anxiety.

When the case came on for trial, Max would not let her be present in the court-room, but she could not go to the kindergarten that day and she spent it alone in her room.

Mr. Atwell acted as counsel for the boy. In his defense he stated that neither Mr. Baker nor

his son had any business in the house and that the latter had been treated like a thief and a criminal trespasser as he deserved to be. He added, "If my client rather exceeded his instructions, he did it in all good faith, believing that he was simply doing his duty in ejecting the fellow from premises that he had feloniously entered.

The lawyer felt certain that Max would be acquitted, but the judge happened to be a friend of Baker's, and, much to Mr. Atwell's disappointment, he sent the case to the grand jury.

Max left the court-room more heavy-hearted than before. He had counted so much upon Mr. Atwell's power and influence, and now to have the case sent up to the grand jury—and the anxiety and mortification prolonged—it seemed to the boy, almost more than he could bear.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH CLEARER VISION.

IN the country, the winter had been long and cold. For weeks the snow had lain deep on field and meadow, and the roads, packed and frozen, had resounded with the merry jangle of the sleigh-bells; but in February there came a warm rain and a thaw that turned the hard snow into a deep slush. The brooks, so long frostbound—now burst their bands and became rushing torrents that swept along with a force and power undreamed of in the summer when they babbled musically over their rocky beds.

At the farm one morning, John Ramsay was busy with his snow shovel clearing away the masses of melting snow about the henhouse and run, while the disconsolate-looking fowls—with drooping tails and dripping feathers—followed him about hoping that he might unearth for them some long-buried bug or worm.

When he had cleared the space and shoveled away the slush about the woodpile, he gathered up an armful of wood and carried it into the house. The kitchen looked as bright and comfort-

able as ever. A fresh shining coat of yellow paint covered the floor under the gay rag mats. The south windows were full of geraniums and fuschias and "sturtions" all abloom, and the tall clock ticked the hours away as it had done for many a year.

Nothing was changed--nothing except the farmer's wife. She sat in a big rocking-chair beside the flower-filled window. Her work-basket stood as usual on the little table beside her, but the once-busy hands were idle now and rested quietly upon her lap. Her face was a little thinner and a little paler, and the blue veins showed clearly on the temples; but it was not these things that made the change in her so noticeable. It was an indescribable--yet very perceptible--change in the expression of the worn face and the slender figure. It was as if she had given up some long continued struggle, and was simply waiting.

As her husband entered the kitchen, she looked up and smiled at him. It was not a nervous propitiatory smile, such as used to flit across her face when she spoke to him. This was quiet, gentle, but quite unafraid. She had lost all fear of her big rough husband, now; but never before had her influence over him been half so great. He could not understand the change in her. He watched her furtively many and many a time when she thought he was reading his paper; but

instead he was trying to read her face—trying in vain. He never could read it. But in the quiet fearless child-likeness that had come upon her, there was something that tamed and mastered his hard rough nature as nothing ever had done before. And besides, deep down in his heart, was a terrible fear—a fear that grew day by day. He would not look at it—would not admit that it was there—but it had been there ever since the day that a neighbor had said to him,—

“Seems to me your wife looks mighty pindlin’ this winter. She’ll slip away from ye some day if ye don’t look out!”

After that, he had engaged Sepha to come every day and help about the work, and Sepha came gladly, partly because she liked the gentle little woman, but more because she felt that this was doing something for Helen.

Then the farmer asked the doctor to drop in “accidental-like” and see his wife, and the doctor—making excuse of a broken harness-strap—stopped in and watched and questioned in a friendly matter-of-course fashion, his unconscious patient; but he told her husband—when the latter followed him to his buggy—that it was not a case for medicine.

“She’s dropped the oars and is just letting herself drift,” the keen-eyed doctor said. “What she needs is something to rouse and interest her. She ought to have some young folks about to brighten

her up. Why don't you get back that boy and girl you had here last winter?"

"Can't. They got sick of us an' cleared out," John Ramsay answered gruffly, and then he handed the doctor his fee and turned back to the barn where he tramped heavily up and down for a long time, while his cows gazed at him in mild-eyed wonder, and the horses moved restlessly in their stalls from sympathy.

The farmer was thinking of all this now, as he sat down near his wife—thinking of it with a sense of his own helplessness that made his heart heavy within him. He could not sit still and think such thoughts, and presently he started for the barn, but as he crossed the yard he saw Sepha just turning in the gate. She was on one of her father's horses and little Patty sat smiling before her, never minding the drizzling rain. Sepha often brought the child, for Mrs. Ramsay seemed to like to have her around.

"I've brought the mail," the girl called, for the mail-box was at the corner near her father's house.

"Well, run in out of the wet," the farmer answered turning back. "I'll see to the horse."

But as the girl sprang down she caught her foot in her dress, and it took her a moment or two to extricate it, so that John Ramsay was right behind her as she entered the kitchen, and saw the eager, hungry look with which his wife gazed at Sepha,

as she went in. He saw, too, the expression of patient disappointment that settled upon the thin face as Sepha said gently,—

“No letter, Mrs. Ramsay, only papers—two of them.”

Patty ran to get a low cricket which she drew close to Mrs. Ramsay's side and sat down on it leaning her bright head affectionately against the woman's knee. She smiled as the thin hand was laid upon her shining curls, but Mrs. Ramsay's eyes were gazing dreamily out through the slow-falling rain.

The farmer looked at her and sighed impatiently. He was used to hard work—but what could he do in a case like this? Mechanically he tore off the wrapper and opened his paper as he threw himself into a chair; but though his eyes rested upon the printed page he saw no word there.

“What *can* I do?” he was asking himself over and over again. “I'd go after Helen and Max if 'twould do any good, but what's the use of havin' 'em here if they don't want to stay? Helen might be willin' enough—but the boy—” He scowled as he recalled that blow that he felt sure had been the immediate cause of the boy's departure, and the scowl deepened as he remembered how he had gone up to Max's room that day after he had carried him and Helen to the station—and how he had found in the closet of that room the suit he had driven over to Herndon to buy. He

could understand the cold bitter anger of the boy. He knew that he himself would have felt much the same under like circumstances.

"But what can I do?" he asked himself again. "I can't go a-beggin' him to come back, not even for—" With the sentence unfinished he glanced across at his wife. She was smiling down at little Patty, but there was something in the smile that made the big strong man turn hastily away.

A moment later, Patty was at his side holding up another paper.

"It was on the floor. I guess you dropped it," the sweet voice was saying.

He took the paper and with a look of surprise examined the address. It was so rarely that any mail came to him except the county paper.

He tore off the wrapper and opened the sheet. It was a Boston daily, and after glancing carelessly at one or two of the pages, he flung it aside growling out,—

"Maybe they think I'll subscribe to their city paper, but I guess they'll find they're mistaken. I don't want none o' their big sheets full of scare-heads an' letters an inch long! Ruther have the 'Gleaner' any day."

He flung aside the paper and turned again to the "Gleaner." Sepha picked up the discarded city paper and glanced at an item here and there. Suddenly she started with a quick breath and, instinctively holding up the sheet to hide her face,

she read, with trembling eagerness, the reporter's highly-colored account of the burglary and assault of Malcolm Dale. When she had read it all her face was pale and her eyes were shining with excitement. Without a word she laid the paper on the table beside the farmer and, with a warning glance at his wife, pointed out to him the article conspicuously marked with a blue pencil.

"Eh?" he ejaculated, as he glanced up at her, then, startled by what he saw in her face, his eyes followed her pointing finger, and he read the article slowly through, the color rising in his cheeks as he did so.

As he flung the paper aside once more, Sepha silently beckoned him from the room and he followed her to the porch out of hearing of his wife.

"It isn't true—I *know* it isn't true!" the girl exclaimed, stamping her foot angrily upon the porch floor. "But oh, Mr. Ramsay, *can't* you do something?"

He stood looking down at her with an expression on his rugged face that she could not understand.

"*Can't* you do *something*?" she repeated impatiently. "I would, if I were a man. You don't believe that story, do you, Mr. Ramsay?"

"Believe it?" he shouted. "Do ye think I'm a fool? Don't I know that boy? Pshaw! I'd as soon believe I'm a burglar and assaulter myself. Look here, Sepha—I'm agoin' to Boston an' you

must stay here an' take care of my wife. You will—won't ye?"

"Of course I will. I shouldn't think you'd need to ask," was the impetuous response, "but Mr. Ramsay, can't you hurry and go *to-day*?"

He stood and looked at her in slow consideration, something as an ox might look at a swallow. "I can't *fly*!" he said, half impatiently, "an' I can't dance around as you do, but I'll ketch that afternoon train if old Pete can get me down t' the station in time."

Sepha did fairly dance with delight then, as she watched him stride off with great steps through the drizzling rain to harness old Pete into the sleigh. When he came back he went to his room and changed his clothes before he said a word to his wife. Then he came through the kitchen and stopped beside her chair.

"Mary," he said, and in his voice there was a tone so new and strange that Sepha glanced at him in surprise. There was a new expression on his face too, and at sight of it the girl beckoned her little sister and the two silently left the room.

John Ramsay did not see them go. He had forgotten their very existence. As he uttered that one word "Mary," his wife started up in her chair, and gazed up at him with her thin hands tightly clasped. She did not speak, only sat looking at him with eyes full of bewildered, incredulous surprise.

That gentle, tender voice calling her seemed like an echo from her lost youth—from those far off, almost forgotten days, when young John Ramsay used to call at her father's house on Sunday evenings. But alas! The tenderness and love had been crowded out as the years went by. It was many and many a day since he had spoken her name in that tone. She could not believe that her ears had heard aright now. But again he spoke, and now his big rough hand was laid on her tightly-clasped ones,—

“Mary, I'm going to the city—for the children—for Max and Helen. You shall have 'em back again if I can persuade 'em to come. You'll get well, then, won't you—little woman?”

One instant longer she gazed incredulously into the face bending over her, then she gave a low eager cry and leaning forward laid her pale cheek against his breast.

“John—John!” she cried, and then her arms were around his neck and she whispered low, “Go—and bring back the children. I'm sure they'll come, but, I think I shall get well now anyway. I couldn't go and leave you now,—John.”

Her face was wet with tears, but they were happy tears. Not much more was said, but when he went away she leaned forward watching him as he drove out of the yard, and he looking back, and catching a glimpse of the thin eager little face among the fuschias and geraniums, gave her

a glad smile—a smile full of the ~~promise~~ of happier days to come.

“I mustn’t get to be an old fool ~~at~~ this late date” he said gruffly to himself as he turned old Pete towards the station, but it was a different sort of gruffness somehow, lacking the old hard ring.

He had plenty to think of on the train; so much that he forgot to be weary or to watch for the end of his journey. His thoughts lingered with his wife, going over the long years they had spent together, and seeing her, and himself as well, through new eyes. She had always been such a gentle timid little thing, and he—he saw now that he had been too rough and hard and cold to her. He had loved her always “better than anything else under God’s heaven!” he said to himself almost fiercely, but he had thought it soft, unmanly, to show it, and so he had chilled and starved her with his rough hard words and ways. He did not understand how it had become so clear and plain to him all at once. Perhaps he had seen it written in her face, growing whiter and sadder day by day. Anyhow—somehow—his eyes had been opened that day, and he knew that they could never be closed again. He vowed that they never should be. Then his thoughts turned to Max and his trouble. From the first he had liked the boy, liked his sturdy independence and his steady industry. Liked too the un-

daunted courage with which he had faced him more than once. “*That* boy arrested for assault and battery!” he muttered angrily. “Must ‘a’ been a set o’ fools to believe any such trash. I’ll give ‘em a piece o’ my mind—that’s one sure thing.”

He had not the faintest idea as to how he was to secure the boy’s freedom, but secure it he would if he had to break into the prison and carry Max off bodily—so he said to himself.

Sepha had given him Helen’s address, and when he reached the city he inquired his way to that street and number.

Helen was no longer acting as doorkeeper at Mrs. Haskill’s and so she paid no attention when a loud long peal rang out; and even when heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs she never thought that they concerned her in any way, but when there followed a knock that shook the door, she opened it hastily and then stood in silent amazement at sight of John Ramsay standing there with a ferocious frown on his face. The frown was for the “pack o’ fools” whom he held responsible for Max’s arrest, but Helen did not know that, and she shrank back nervously, as she invited him to enter.

He went in and shut the door behind him, his eyes searching the room eagerly.

“He ain’t here he,” he cried. “Is he in prison, Helen?”

"Max? Oh, no, Uncle John, he hasn't been in prison at all."

The farmer dropped into the nearest chair. "But the paper? Wasn't it true then—all that story?" he questioned eagerly.

"Oh Uncle John, you *didn't* believe that Max had done any such dreadful thing, did you?" the girl cried with quick indignation.

"Believe it? What do you take me for?" roared the farmer. "Don't ye s'pose I know better'n to swallow any such a yarn as that? I'd as soon believe I'd burglar'd an' 'saulted myself!"

The next moment John Ramsay was more astonished than ever he had been before in his whole life, for, without a moment's warning, he found a pair of arms about his neck and felt a warm kiss on his rough hairy cheek.

But he wasn't displeased—not a bit of it. In fact, he liked it so well he returned the kiss instantly, and then Helen drew back hastily, and the two looked at each other in the queerest astonishment. Indeed they had both been taken by surprise.

The girl was the first to recover herself. Her quick instinct told her that a wonderful change had come upon her uncle, but she had no time now to think about that. She simply accepted it as a delightful fact.

"Uncle John, I do believe you've come to the city on purpose to help Max!" she exclaimed.

"Well, what else should I come for, I'd like to know," he answered, trying to speak gruffly and making an utter failure of it.

"That was so good of you" the girl replied softly, "but we hope it's all right now."

"Why—how? Tell me all about it, quick!" commanded the man in his masterful way.

So she told him the whole story from the beginning to the trial. She ended. "And the judge was a friend of Mr. Baker's and because he was sure that the jury would not bring in a verdict of guilty against Max—he sent the case to the grand jury."

The farmer, under his breath, muttered something not at all complimentary to the judge and the grand jury."

Helen went on. "But Mr. Atwell happened to be well acquainted with the chairman of the grand jury, and he saw him and told him all about the case, and so it isn't to be brought up at all—and of course they can't put Max in prison."

But this explanation did not satisfy the farmer.

"That's well enough as far's it goes," he answered "but it don't go far enough. They've slung dirt at Max in their city papers, an' now I say they ought to publish the other side of it. Let the whole story be printed so everybody'll know the plain truth of the matter."

"Yes," said Helen with a sigh. "That's what Max and I wanted, and Mr. Atwell tried to have

it done, but he didn't succeed. He says Max is lucky to get off without any punishment—and so I suppose it must end so."

By this time the farmer was tramping angrily up and down the room. Helen trembled lest the boarders below send up a protest, as John Ramsay growled,—

"I'd jist like to get my hands on that Baker fellow. I'd give it to 'em both—father an' son—an' that reporter chap into the bargain."

As he uttered the last word the door opened, and Max stood in the doorway gazing in blank amazement at the unexpected visitor. But the farmer gave him no time to wonder. He sprang forward and seized both the boy's hands, as he exclaimed,

"Max, my boy, I've come for you and Helen. we've found out—your aunt an' me—that we can't do without you any longer. I guess," he stopped and his voice shook as he went on, "I guess your aunt found that out months ago, but there are some pig-headed blockheads in the world that have to have things hammered into 'em with the hardest kind o' whacks, an' I'm afraid I'm one o' that sort. Max, I'm—I'm sorry. There—will ye come back?"

It was the first time in all his life that John Ramsay had ever said "I'm sorry" for a fault of his own. He owned to himself afterwards that it was about the hardest thing that he had ever done, but he had silently vowed when he said "good-by"

to his wife, that he would do it, and a great load seemed to be lifted from his heart as he uttered the words.

And Max—after one incredulous second—Max found himself wringing his uncle's hands and crying like a baby. The tears were running down John Ramsay's cheeks too, and—not to be out of the fashion—Helen was sobbing softly behind her handkerchief. But happy tears are soon dried, and these were all happy.

Five minutes later the three were talking quietly together, making plans for the future. Then Helen set to work to prepare a supper—a royal feast to celebrate this happy day, and while she flew about cooking, and setting the table, she asked questions innumerable about her aunt and Sepha and Patty and everybody else, even down to Sarah Barnes. And after supper Helen wrote a long, loving letter to her aunt, and Max added a postscript, and just as she was about to seal the epistle, the farmer handed her a slip of paper on which he had written a line or two to be inclosed, and Max ran out to the corner box and posted the letter so that it might without fail reach his aunt the next day.

The farmer had been anxious to go back home the next morning, but he would not go without Helen and Max, and Helen could not go until she had seen Miss Ross and Mrs. Springer.

But these ladies, though sorry enough to lose her

from the kindergarten work, were but too glad to know that she and her brother were to return to the safe shelter of a home among friends, and so they bade her "good-by" and "God-speed."

It was hard to say "good by" to the babies whose very helplessness and weakness had made them the dearer to the girl. She gathered them one after another in her arms and kissed them and cried over them, as she whispered in their ears promises of beautiful days by and by when they should go off with her to the fair hill country, there to find health and strength as well as happiness; for already she was planning—planning beautiful things which she was sure that her aunt and Sepha would help her to accomplish.

While Helen was making her farewell visit at the kindergarten, her brother was saying farewell to some of the good friends that he had made—to Mr. Schmidt and Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Atwell. Within a day or two the court had decided that Mr. Baker had no claim on the house of which Max had had charge, so no care-taker was needed there now; but the lawyer took Max's address, meaning to get the boy into his office whenever he could.

John Ramsay spent the day seeing the sights of the city, and when at night he returned to the boarding-house, he declared that no money would induce him to live in such a dirty noisy place, and that he'd rather mow a ten-acre lot than loaf

around those streets another day. But he took Max to a clothing store and bought for him a good serviceable outfit.

"I owe it to you, Max," he said, "and I'm sure you won't refuse it—this time."

And the boy did not refuse it, though even then he had a little struggle with his pride; but Max was beginning to feel that perhaps his pride needed a little pruning. The boy had learned more than one hard lesson in this winter when he had been his own master.

Now that he had consented to go back he did not expect to find everything to his mind on the farm, but he did feel that his uncle and he would work together in a different spirit now, and with a better appreciation of each other's feelings and purposes.

As for Helen—when once she had torn herself away from the clinging baby fingers in that big upper room—she had no fears and no regrets in returning to her beloved hill country. She could not yet understand the strange change in her aunt that last summer; but she knew now that she had never really doubted the love that the gentle patient heart had held for her and for Max. She was sure that she was going *home*.

She too had some shopping, to do, however, for her uncle had slipped some bills into her hand and told her to "buy all the toggery" she needed, and when she bought the garments that she had so

long wanted, she did not forget to select gifts for her aunt and Sepha and little Blossom as well.

Once in the train, however, she grew every moment more impatient to reach the end of her journey, and John Ramsay was quite as restless and impatient as she. He had never been used to borrow trouble, but now he found himself thinking constantly of the frail little figure leaning back in the big rocking-chair beside the flowers. "What if she should be worse?" he asked himself more than once, and he longed to open the throttle and make the engine speed ahead, faster, faster, faster!

Max alone sat quiet and thoughtful, looking forward to the future and wondering if it held for him other days as full of trouble and suffering as those now slipping so rapidly into the past.

CHAPTER XVI.

A JOYFUL HOME-COMING.

AND while the train sped on all too slowly for John Ramsay's impatient desire—in the low gray farmhouse a glad welcome was awaiting the travelers.

Such preparations as had been made there that day! Indeed, the preparations had begun the very hour that John Ramsay set forth for the city, for the newborn hope and happiness of that hour seemed to have set free the springs of health and strength in the little woman who had gazed so eagerly out after him from among the greenery in the window. The keen-eyed old doctor had been right. It was not drugs that she needed; it was the elixir of happiness, and of that she had partaken freely for three days, and marvelous indeed was the change it had wrought in her. Frail and delicate she was still, very likely she would always be so—but many a time in those three days had Sepha looked at her with eyes full of delighted wonder.

And now that the day had come—the day that was to bring back the children for whom she had

mourned through the long winter months, Mrs. Ramsay herself was like a little child in her eager delight.

She would have Sepha cook everything that her husband or Helen or Max most cared for; and one of the best linen tablecloths must be brought out, and the fine old china that her sailor grandfather had brought from over the sea as a wedding present to his bride. Nothing was too good for this joyful occasion!

Sepha tried to make her rest, but she could not rest. She was continually thinking of something else to do for the comfort or pleasure of those for whom she was watching; and when there was absolutely nothing else that she could imagine to do, then she sat down with her chair by the window facing the road, and began to watch for them, although old Pete, driven by Jack Dunlap, had hardly gotten out of sight.

Then Sepha brought out comb and brush and, without asking permission, took down the thin soft hair that was so much whiter than it had been six months before, and brushed it out and then arranged it according to a fashion of her own.

"There!" she exclaimed, when this was done, "I knew that would suit your face. Now go and put on your best dress—please."

Mrs. Ramsay hesitated. "It seems kind o' foolish to dress up," she said, "an old woman like me!"

But Sepha was imperative. "Go," she repeated, "else I shall rummage round in your closet myself and get it."

"As if I'd mind your rummaging," the little woman said, but she did as she was told. She had done as she was told all her life.

"That's better," Sepha said, when Mrs. Ramsay came back smoothing down the folds of the black dress that had been her best for years, "but---haven't you something white---some lace?"

"You can look in the box in the upper drawer in my bureau, and see what there is, child."

Sepha went, and brought back a neckerchief of soft fine linen with a ruffle of lace around the edge. She laid it about the little woman's neck, and fastened it with an old-fashioned silver pin that she had found in the drawer.

"There, auntie," she said, using Helen's affectionate name for the little woman, "you look as pretty as a picture."

"Nonsense, child!" answered the farmer's wife hastily, but a faint pink crept into her cheeks and her eyes brightened. It was so long---so many years---since anything like that had been said to her!

Sepha tried to keep her talking that the time might pass more rapidly, but she could neither talk nor listen now that the hands on the tall clock pointed to seven, and in a few minutes they would

be home again—the three persons in all the world for whom she lived.

And while she watched and waited and strained her ears to catch the sound of sleighbells, old Pete was doing his best to bring her her heart's desire; and Helen was eagerly noting each well-remembered landmark that loomed up in the starlight.

The schoolhouse, dark and lonely against the white landscape, brought swift memories of Mr. Keith and the stirring scenes there the year before. The Dunlap house recalled to her her last glimpse of Sepha that morning when Max and she had gone away, as they thought then, forever. There was a light in the Dunlap kitchen now and Helen could see the farmer reading beside the lamp, and the big flabby figure of Sarah Barnes rocking idly to and fro beside the fire.

Jack left them here, and then as the Dunlap house was left behind, the girl's eyes began to shine and her heart to beat quickly in eager longing to be folded once more to that mother-heart that she knew now she had never really doubted.

It seemed to her that old Pete was crawling, and she longed to spring out and run, that she might get there the sooner.

But old Pete plodded on, and at last with a loud "whoa!" the farmer pulled him up beside the porch steps, and there was the door wide open, with the lamplight shining on Sepha's eager

young face, and on the no less eager one of the little woman behind her whom she was trying to keep out of the draught.

Oh but that was a happy home-coming, though at first it was almost a silent one, for hearts—even happy hearts—are too full for words sometimes. Even Sepha's usually ready tongue was still at first. It was joy enough for her, after one quick earnest greeting, to load herself with Helen's wraps and everybody's bundles, and then to stand aside and watch and listen with all her glad heart shining through her happy eyes. She turned her back quickly when she saw the farmer's face as he bent over his wife and kissed her; but Max stared with incredulous eyes, and a queer feeling stirring in his heart.

"He must be changed indeed, to do that," he said to himself.

And such a supper as that was! There was chicken-pie, tender and delicious, because the travelers must have something hot; and there were nutcake and fruit cake and preserved pears, because Helen liked them; and there were custard pie and crullers, because Max liked them; there was the lightest of home-made bread and the sweetest of home-made butter for everybody.

And Sepha kept piling on Mrs. Ramsay's plate things which the little woman was far too happy to eat; and John Ramsay, having once thrown aside his crusty roughness of speech, found him-

self so much happier that he silently vowed he would never put it on again, and he beamed upon everybody and was happy as he had not been since his wedding day.

The winter days sped swiftly after this, and when they were over and the spring work began it began very differently from what it had been that other spring twelve months before. The farmer treated Max like a son now and not like a "hand" and the two pulled together instead of straining apart. They did not always think alike by any means, but each had looked deep into the other's heart and there could never again be lasting bitterness, and hard feeling between them; while in the house between Helen and her aunt, there was never anything but love and tenderness.

One day as the two were sitting together with their sewing, Helen suddenly dropped her work and looked earnestly into Mrs. Ramsay's face.

"Well child, what is it?" the latter questioned.

"Auntie, what was it that came between you and me last summer? was it my fault?" Helen asked wistfully.

"No, dear, it was—nobody's fault. At least, I'll tell you, Helen just how it was. Your uncle cared so much for Max—more perhaps for him than for you in a way, because he was a boy; and your uncle had always wanted a son of his own—but he had an idea that it would spoil Max to show

him how much he cared, and so he never praised him, though I know he was proud of his steady work; and I s'pose he was harsher than he realized, and Max began to resent it. I'm not blaming, him child; any boy would have felt the same and not many would have borne what Max did. Yet all the time your uncle did love him and was planning for him. You never knew why he took the boarders, last summer?"

Helen shook her head.

The little woman smiled and lifted her head with a touch of gentle pride. She was so glad to tell Helen this. So glad that she *could* be proud of her husband. She went on hurriedly,—

"He had heard Max talk about the farming college—maybe they don't call it that, but you know what I mean—and he made up his mind that he would send Max there for a year or two since he seemed to want so much to go; and when Mr. Mallory came to ask if we'd take those people to board, your uncle let them come just for that, and dear—every dollar of that board money he put in the bank for Max."

"That was *good* of him, auntie," was the girl's low comment. Her aunt went on,

"But he couldn't get rid of the notion that I was spoiling you both, and he made me promise that if he agreed to send Max to that college, I would stop 'fussin'' over you, as he called it, and so I did as much as I could, but it hurt me

cruelly to do it, Helen, and when you and Max went away—

She could not go on, but Helen's arms were about her neck, and Helen's tender kisses were falling on her cheek, and further words were needless.

The Kingsleys and Harvey Slade spent a month at the farm the next summer, and both Helen and Max enjoyed more than one mountain climb and row on the lake with them; for at first, Ned went because he did not fancy being deserted by his chum, and after a while, he discovered that there were apt to be very good times when Helen and Sepha and Max were of the party—too good times for him to miss—and so he flung aside what Harvey called his “airs” and did his best to make himself agreeable.

And Sepha—bright little Sepha—had her heart's desire at last, when her father summoned resolution to “give Sarah Barnes her walking-ticket,” as Sepha gleefully expressed it. Then the girl took the housekeeping cares upon her own slender but competent shoulders and made a comfortable and happy home for her father and little Blossom. Not for Jack however, for, undeterred by all he heard of the hard experience of Max—Jack went off to Boston to seek his fortune. He is still seeking it, and Sepha is still hoping that he too will be driven back to the home that is waiting for him.



